

Knowledge can help you avoid seasonal diet dangers

by R.J. Ignelzi

You started out the holiday party circuit with such virtuous intentions, pledging to nibble only carrot sticks and whole-wheat crackers while sipping club soda.

HOLIDAY LITES - Knowledge can help you avoid the diet dangers of the season. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett. But then you came face-to-face with reality ... and the bar and buffet table.

Frothy cocktails, tantalizing appetizers and decadent desserts that you've been craving since last December.

Sure, you could give in to temptation, throwing caution and your diet to the wind, only to feel guilty and thicker around the middle come January. Or, you could simply try to make sensible and nutritious food choices.

Being health conscious doesn't mean you can't enjoy the holiday festivities. Go ahead, eat, drink and be merry. Just do so wisely by carefully considering your food options.

Nutrition experts weigh in on some healthier holiday fare.

CHAMPAGNE OR EGGNOG

While eggnog has calcium and protein going for it, that's still not enough to make it a nutritional winner over less caloric beverages like champagne.

"Anything that goes up against eggnog is going to win. Eggnog is loaded with fat and is very high in calories," says Katie Bogue, registered dietitian and director Regional Nutritional Network in San Diego.

A flute of the bubbly has about 75 calories and no fat, while 5 ounces of eggnog can have more than 300 calories and 12 grams of fat. Some nutritionists say champagne's natural effervescence might help fill you up so you'll limit your grazing.

WINE OR BEER

Per ounce, beer has fewer calories than wine. A 12-ounce beer is about 150 calories. A light beer has about 100 calories for 12 ounces. Wine, both white and red, has about 90 calories per 4-ounce glass. However, because beer is rarely served in anything smaller than 12-ounce servings, it ends up being the more caloric if you're comparing a serving of beer to a serving of wine.

You also get a healthy shot of antioxidants from wine - no matter if it's red or white.

"Nutritionally, there's really not a big difference between red or white wine," says Joan Rupp, a registered dietitian and instructor at San Diego State University. "We had thought that red has more antioxidants, but now research says that both offer it. Both help increase your HDL (good cholesterol) and keep it from sticking to the artery walls."

But beer lovers should note that their beverage of choice is not a nutritional slouch.

Like wines, the darker beers also contain beneficial polyphenols (plant chemicals) that might help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer.

ALMONDS OR MIXED NUTS

Although most nuts have lots of nutrients including protein and fiber, almonds are probably a smarter choice than mixed nuts.

Almonds offer mono-unsaturated fat and lots of healthy omega-3 fatty acids (a healthful antioxidant) and vitamin E. If you eat a handful of mixed nuts, you're likely to get a few cashews or macadamia nuts which are higher in calories and contain some saturated fat.

The only real problem with eating any nuts is that you're likely to eat too many. Because all nuts are calorically dense, limit your serving to just 1 ounce or a handful

POTATO CHIPS AND DIP OR CORN CHIPS AND GUACAMOLE

The tortilla chips with guacamole and salsa is the hands-down nutritional favorite.

"The guacamole has healthy mono-unsaturated fat. Salsa has vitamins A and C and no fat. And, it's a great way to get some veggies," Rupp says. "The potato chips and dip is just salt and fat on top of salty and fatty chips."

The tomatoes in the salsa are a good source of lycopene, a potent carotenoid antioxidant that may help reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes, says Christine Zoumas, registered dietitian and researcher at the

FUDGE OR CHOCOLATE-COVERED TOFFEE

OK, so neither of these traditional holiday sweets are high on the nutritional scale. However, if you have to have one (and, please make it only one piece), have the chocolate fudge. A 2-inch square of the rich chocolate has about 230 calories and 6 grams of fat (3 gram of it are saturated).

The toffee not only has more calories, about 290 per 2-inch square, but also more than three times the fat - 20 grams and 12 of those are saturated.

Yes, the toffee has some healthy fat thanks to the nuts, but fudge is rich in flavanols, the compounds found in chocolate that protect your blood vessels.

BAKED POTATO WITH SOUR CREAM OR SWEET POTATO WITH MAPLE SYRUP GLAZE

Nutrition experts are unanimously sweet on sweet potatoes.

"Sweet potatoes are one of the most underappreciated vegetables in the U.S.," says Cheryl Rock, researcher and professor of nutrition at the University of California San Diego's School of Medicine.

Bogue agrees, calling them the "powerhouse of vegetables, loaded with vitamins."

Sweet potatoes have beta carotene, antioxidants and about twice the fiber and potassium of regular baked russets. Although a maple glaze adds sugar and calories, it's a drop in the nutritional bucket compared with the fat and calories of sour cream.

BAKED BRIE OR PORT CHEDDAR LOG

Although neither of these choices will ever be confused with a health food, if you must choose one, the cheddar log has fewer calories and fat. Hickory Farms Cheese Celebration (a port and cheddar cheese log covered in chopped nuts) has 240 calories in 3 ounces. The baked brie, which is coated in butter and phyllo dough, is often accompanied by a sweet chutney. It's about 420 calories for the same-size serving.

A smarter cheese tray choice is a small chunk of Swiss cheese, which is lower in fat and sodium than most other hard cheeses. Or, have some plain brie without the pastry topping. It's only 94 calories per ounce.

BAKED HAM OR TURKEY

Turkey is the more healthful choice as long as you stay within some guidelines.

Opt for the white meat. White turkey meat has fewer calories (4 ounces has about 175 calories and about 4 grams of fat) than the same portion of dark meat (about 210 calories and 8 grams of fat). However, for those extra dark meat calories, you get twice the iron and zinc. If you really want to save yourself some fat and calories, don't eat the skin.

For all its bad press, ham is not really such a nutritional bad boy. It actually has about the same amount of calories as dark meat turkey with only slightly more fat. The problem is that ham's sodium content is in the stratosphere, and it contains nitrites, which may be converted into harmful carcinogens, Bogue says.

3 MINI EGG ROLLS OR 3 BUFFALO WINGS

"Even though they're both fried, egg rolls are healthier. Buffalo wings are just fat on a bone," Rupp says.

Add some creamy blue cheese dressing and you're packing in more than 300 calories and 26 grams of fat for only three of the little nibblers.

"We may think of wings as having some healthy protein, but it's such a small amount of meat that it really doesn't count," Bogue says.

The mini egg rolls don't have much nutritional value, but three of them add up to just a little more than 100 calories with 3 grams of fat.

SUGAR COOKIE OR A GINGERBREAD COOKIE

Sorry, Santa, but the spicy guy wins. Due to its high butter content, sugar cookies have nearly twice the calories and saturated fat as gingerbread cookies.

An average-size decorated sugar cookie has about 115 calories and 8 grams of fat while the same size decorated gingerbread cookie has about 65 calories and 3.5 grams of fat, according to the nutritionists. Plus, some diet experts say that the ginger helps break down protein, aiding in digestion, which could come in handy after weeks of feasting.

PUMPKIN PIE OR APPLE PIE

Too bad pumpkin pie isn't this popular all year long. As desserts go, it's one of the healthiest. Pumpkin pie has more vitamin A, fiber, calcium, potassium and folate than any other pie, and most other desserts, Rupp says.

Apple pie with its double crust provides more fat, sugar and calories than the pumpkin. It also doesn't offer the vitamins and calcium.

A 4.5-ounce piece of pumpkin pie has about 270 calories and 11 grams of fat. An equivalent slice of apple pie has about 320 calories and 14 grams of fat.

Pumpkin, like sweet potatoes, provides about a quarter of your need for vitamin K, a nutrient that's important for bone health. It's also rich in carotenoid antioxidants, which help maintain the body's defenses and fight disease.

Food fight

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Contrary to rumor, most people only gain about 1 pound during the holidays, not the often-reported 5 to 7 pounds. That's the good news.

The bad news? Most people won't take off that extra pound, and the weight keeps accumulating year after year, reports the National Institutes of Health.

But with a little thought, planning and restraint, you don't even need to gain that one pesky pound. Diet and nutrition experts offers some tips for a healthy holiday season.

- Eat regularly, but lightly, before you party. Don't starve yourself all day in anticipation of a party or dinner. You're in danger of arriving feeling ravenous and eating everything in sight. Instead, have some low-fat, healthy snacks throughout the day so you're less likely to overindulge while you're out.

- Compensate for partying. Plan some healthy eating days leading up to and after a holiday event to make up for extra calories consumed.

- Be assertive. Don't feel as though you have to say "yes" to everyone that offers you food and drinks this time

of year. If you are not hungry, say so. Don't let yourself be bullied into eating something you really don't want or know is unhealthy.

- Survey the buffet. Make a conscious decision about which foods you'll put on your plate and which you'll pass up. Try to sample a variety of foods in small portions. Don't waste your calories on familiar foods you have every day.

- Put together a plate of food from the buffet and sit down and eat rather than walking around the buffet table several times or sampling from passing trays.

- Leave something on your plate. Despite what your parents tried to drum into your head as a child, don't feel obliged to clear your plate. When you feel full, stop eating.

- Choose your favorite dessert and share it with someone. Just a taste of a special treat could be enough to satisfy.

- Avoid drinking too much alcohol. Alcohol can increase your appetite and lower your resolve to resist overeating.

- Socializing with family and friends should be your No. 1 priority at holiday gatherings. Food should come in a distant second place.

- Rather than trying to lose weight during the holiday, focus on preventing weight gain. Trying to shed pounds this time of year only leads to frustration and guilt.

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