Step Away From the Food? And Other Tips for a Healthier Holiday at the Office

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’Tis the season for reindeer, mistletoe? and an abundance of sweets in the office.

The holidays can be a challenging time for anyone trying to watch their weight or maintain a healthy diet, especially with all the sugary treats that tend to show up at workplace parties and gatherings.

But it’s possible to navigate the season in a healthy, mindful way, without depriving yourself of a little fun, says Jodi Charvoz, a registered dietitian and senior coordinator of employee wellness and health promotion with UA Life & Work Connections.

The most important advice Charvoz has to offer: As long as you have a healthy regular diet, it’s OK to allow yourself some goodies, without guilt.

"If 80 percent of the time you're eating pretty healthfully, then that gives you some freedom to be able to enjoy things,” she says.

"Life is always going to present opportunities to enjoy food and socialize at the same time, and when you get into this mindset of certain foods being 'bad' and others being 'good,' it can actually trigger more opportunities to sabotage your overall healthy plan. Just be mindful about what you're doing. Plan that, 'Yes, I'm going to enjoy something sweet today,' and just enjoy it and be done with it."

To prevent yourself from overindulging, Charvoz offers the following pointers.

Be prepared

Don't let yourself get too hungry | Navigating the holidays healthfully starts with a nutritious daily diet that's rich in vegetables, fruit, lean protein and fiber, Charvoz says. When we feel full, we are less likely to overdo it on goodies. Because a healthy diet starts with a healthy breakfast, Charvoz suggests setting up a five-day breakfast plan that includes nutritious offerings like oatmeal, nuts, fruit, eggs, toast, granola and smoothies with added protein. You should also pack a lunch daily? Charvoz suggests preparing a sandwich, salad or leftovers from the night before? and keep healthy snacks like fruits, nuts and veggies on hand at the office. Drinking lots of healthy fluids, like water, tea and zero-calorie sparkling water, can also help curb cravings, she says.

Make a holiday survival pact | Make a pact with yourself going into the holiday season. Commit to eating healthy meals and snacks, drinking more water, and perhaps enjoying just one holiday food item per day or week? whatever works best for you.
Boost your daily physical activity | If you know you're going to be eating more sweets than usual, consider upping the amount of regular exercise you do during the week to help offset the effects.

Tips for party throwers

Incorporate party activities | If you're on the planning committee for your office party this year, you might want to think about incorporating an activity that gets people up and moving, Charvoz suggests, like a photo-based scavenger hunt on campus.

Set a menu theme | To avoid an onslaught of desserts at potluck-style gatherings, create a menu theme and sign-up sheet in advance, asking people to commit to specific dishes. The menu should include savory options, healthy options like fruits and vegetables, and a limited number of sweets.

Keep plates small | People eat more when they have a larger plate to fill. Charvoz suggests providing party plates that are smaller than 10 inches. Smaller serving utensils can also encourage people to take smaller portions.

Ditch the sugary drinks | Liquid calories are easy to consume, but it's better to save your calories for food, Charvoz says. Instead of offering soda at your party, opt for unsweetened iced tea or zero-calorie sparkling flavored water that can be enhanced with fresh fruit.

Keep leftover treats out of high-traffic areas | Store leftovers and goodies in sealed containers in the refrigerator or away from heavily trafficked areas of the office. When goodies are less readily accessible, it helps eliminate the temptation for casual walk-by snacking.

Tips for partygoers

Be selective | When loading up your plate, avoid treats you can have any time of year - like candy bars, for example - and instead hold out for homemade cookies, pies or other fare that you might only get during the holiday season. And don't feel like you have to sample everything on the table. Just focus on enjoying the foods you really love, Charvoz advises.

Don't hang out by the food | Chatting by the snack table increases the likelihood for absent-minded munching. Try to put some physical distance between you and the food.

Throw your plate away when you're done
When eating from a disposable plate, don't hang onto the empty plate too long after you finish, or you might be tempted to reload.

Give yourself time to digest | After you're done eating, give yourself some time - at least 20 minutes - before going back for seconds. If you're still hungry then, allow yourself a moderate portion of one or two things you really love, and savor them, Charvoz says. "It's about taking a mindful approach to eating and enjoying food," she says. "If you're going to have something, really enjoy it, and savor the flavor, the texture, whatever it is about it that you enjoy."

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