

Enjoy the holidays while eating less sugar

The holidays are all about family, fun and feasts, which can make it one of the most difficult times of year to practice healthy eating habits. People are naturally drawn to cookies, cakes and pies because sugar directly impacts the reward center in the brain, releasing the “feel good” hormone called dopamine.

While sweet treats can be enjoyed in moderation, consuming too many added sugars can lead to negative health outcomes such as weight gain, diabetes, heart disease and inflammation. Here are seven tips on how to limit your sugar intake and be healthy this holiday season:

1. When baking, consider using sugar substitutes or healthy recipe substitutions like unsweetened apple sauce, dried fruits, honey, agave nectar, whipped Greek yogurt or cinnamon. You might even try baking with no added sugars.
2. Try to limit your carbohydrate consumption to no more than 1-2 servings per meal. Be mindful when choosing items like breads, potatoes, pasta, crackers and pastries because those may contain large amounts of sugar or unwanted calories. Instead, put more vegetables on your plate. Fill half your plate with colorful veggies to increase your fiber intake and keep insulin levels from spiking.
3. Eat more protein-rich foods (i.e., a salad with lean chicken, a handful of unsalted nuts, a protein bar, a piece of low-fat string cheese). Protein keeps you fuller for longer when compared to sugars.
4. Avoid snacking between meals, as well as skipping meals. Showing up at a party too hungry may cause you to overeat and snack on unhealthy appetizers before dinner is served.
5. Choose beverages wisely. Mixed alcohol drinks and those oh so sweet, flavored lattes can add up to a lot of extra sugar and calories rather quickly. Since dehydration can cause you to feel hungry and overeat, drink 6-8 glasses of water per day.
6. Don't make it all about food. Rather than getting together to share a meal, sprinkle in some games or other holiday activities as a way of connecting with loved ones over the holidays.
7. Continue to be physically active so you can burn off some of the extra calories you may be consuming. For instance, if you're out holiday shopping, use the stairs, do an extra lap or take the parking spot that's a little farther away.

If you have diabetes or prediabetes, it's especially important to limit sugary foods. In addition, make sure you also know all of your numbers, including your blood sugar levels, cholesterol and triglyceride levels, blood pressure and weight. Since November is National Diabetes Month, talk with your doctor if you would like to be tested or are concerned about any of your levels or numbers.