

Merry, healthy eating

The festive season is often a time to indulge, but one can still feast healthily with wise food choices



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Cooking and eating healthily sounds impossible during the festive season, with people dining out more often or whipping up indulgent meals for family and friends.

Dietitians, however, say it can be done without being a party pooper. All it takes is planning.

Ms Catherine Koh, principal dietitian at Alexandra Hospital, said: "Never go to a party hungry."

Instead, she suggested, have a salad, cherry tomatoes or low glycemic-index fruit such as apples, pears and guava, and a big glass of water before heading out.

Drinking water can help prevent overeating, said Ms Mah Wai Yee, principal dietitian at Farrer Park Hospital. Sometimes, people confuse thirst and hunger, and are tempted to snack or have a second helping when what the body needs is water.

She said: "Drinking sufficient water helps a person feel satiated and it keeps the body and digestive system functioning optimally. Before grabbing something to eat the next time you feel peckish, reach for water first."

Loading up on vegetables at the party is another strategy, said Ms Bibi Chia, principal dietitian at the Raffles Diabetes & Endocrine Centre, as is limiting gravy and deep-fried food.

She added: "Christmas and New Year celebrations often extend beyond the actual days. It is important to prioritise which days to have a little more and which days to have only healthier options. The festive season comes only once a year, so do enjoy different foods, but go for smaller portions."

Eating slowly and making time to socialise during meals are other ways to prevent over-eating.

When presented with a feast or cooking a festive meal, Ms Mah suggested going for turkey rather than ham or sausages. "Ham and sausages are high in sodium and saturated fat. Roasted turkey is lower in fat, especially saturated fat, and sodium, and it is a good source of vitamins B6 and B12, iron and zinc."

To cut down further on fat, she suggested removing the skin before eating and choosing breast meat instead of thigh or leg meat.

"Do not save space for dessert," said Ms Koh, adding that they are usually higher in fat and sugar. If there is a choice, pick healthier ones such as chiffon cakes and jellies, she said.

Ms Mah added: "Cream-based or chocolate desserts, cookies and ice cream are usually the highlight at a festive feast and can be unhealthy if taken excessively. It is all right to have some of these desserts, but try substituting them with fruit desserts such as fruit with yogurt, apple crumble and fruit tartlets or parfaits for a healthier sweet treat."

Good decisions extend to planning and cooking festive meals too.

"As dietitians, we think everything we cook can be healthier and tastier," said Ms Koh. "We look at the ingredients and see what can be modified, but not so much that we lose the traditional flavour. Food can be lower in salt and fat, and the best part is that it tastes good."

She walked the talk by roasting chicken with tandoori spices without skin, the way it is done traditionally; amping up the flavour of roasted vegetables with dried herbs; lightening up a fish pie by replacing half the potatoes in the topping with cauliflower; and baking a cake without butter. Diet soda replaced the sugary version in her alcohol-free Christmas punch.

Her recipes shaved a quarter to about half the calories off the traditional versions without sacrificing taste. There was cheese in the fish pie, but the cauliflower worked to reduce the dish's overall calories. Her marble cake had a chocolate topping, but was baked without butter. Stripping the skin off the chicken and marinating it overnight ensured that the flavour of the spices and tenderising effect of yogurt got deep into the bird.

Cooks can pick fish as the main course over poultry or meat as, depending on the cooking style, fish dishes can be lower in calories. For carbohydrates, she suggested picking a lower glycemic option. Choices include roasted potatoes or corn on the cob instead of mashed potatoes, and basmati rice instead of jasmine rice.

The dietitians also suggested including colourful vegetables to add vitamins and fibre, using heart-healthy oils such as olive, enticing kids with skewers of fruit and choosing chiffon or sponge cakes over butter and cream ones.

Ms Mah said: "It is not about depriving yourself and over-restricting your intake. Practise eating in moderation and avoid over-indulgence and you can still enjoy your Christmas feasting while preventing weight gain."

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Dietitian Catherine Koh's marble cake has a chocolate topping and is baked without butter.
ST PHOTOS: TIMOTHY DAVID

Alexandra Hospital's principal dietitian Catherine Koh's healthy recipes for the festive season

Marble castella cake

INGREDIENTS

- Olive oil spray
- Five 55g eggs, yolks and whites separated, room temperature
- 100g soft brown sugar
- 100g plain flour, sifted
- 2 Tbs honey, mixed with 2 Tbs hot water
- 1/2 Tbs matcha or cocoa powder mixed with 2 Tbs hot water
- Chocolate chips (optional)
- Rum essence (optional)

METHOD

1. Preheat oven to 150 deg C. Line the bottom of a 20cm round or square cake tin with baking paper. Spray with olive oil to coat the bottom and sides.
2. Beat the egg whites at high speed until foamy. Add sugar in two to three lots until soft peaks form. Do not beat until stiff.
3. Beat the egg yolks and strain them. Add the beaten yolks to the whites 2 Tbs at a time at medium speed, until well combined, about one minute. Add flour and mix well at low speed.

4. Pour in the honey mixture and continue to beat for one minute.
5. Pour 120g of the batter into a bowl and stir in the matcha or cocoa mixture. Blend well.
6. Spoon 4 to 5 Tbs of the plain batter into the middle of the cake tin, add 1 Tbs of the coloured batter on top. Continue to alternate layers until there is no batter left. Lightly drop the cake tin from a height to remove any big air bubbles. Drag a wooden skewer through the batter to create a marble pattern.

7. Bake for 40 to 45 minutes or until a skewer inserted into the middle of the cake comes out clean. Turn off the oven and leave the cake inside for 15 minutes. Peel off the baking paper and cool the cake on a rack.
8. Microwave dark chocolate chips for two minutes over medium heat, add rum essence and stir to make a smooth topping for the cake, if desired.

Serves six. Each slice has about 150 calories without the chocolate topping.



Tandoori chicken and roasted vegetable medley

TANDOORI CHICKEN INGREDIENTS

- One 1kg chicken, 1kg chicken drumsticks or 4 whole chicken legs (legs and thighs)
- Salt and pepper

Marinade

- 1/2 brown onion or 5 small shallots, chopped
- 2 Tbs ginger, chopped
- 4 to 5 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 Tbs garam masala
- 2 tsp turmeric powder
- 2 tsp cumin powder
- 2 tsp coriander powder
- 2 tsp cayenne pepper or red chilli powder
- 1 Tbs smoked paprika
- 1 cup plain Greek yogurt
- 1 tin tomato paste (170g)
- 2 Tbs lemon juice
- 1 tsp salt
- Black pepper

METHOD

1. Wash the chicken and, using clean hands, remove the skin. Trim off any visible fat. Dry the chicken well. Place it on a chopping board and make deep slashes with a sharp knife on the thigh and drumstick area. Poke the chicken all over with a fork to allow the marinade to seep in. If using drumsticks or chicken legs, slash the thickest parts with a knife after removing the skin.
2. Rub salt and pepper all over the chicken. Set the chicken aside.
3. In a mixing bowl, combine the marinade ingredients and whisk to mix. Coat the chicken with the marinade, cover and refrigerate overnight.

4. Preheat the oven to 200 deg C. Line a roasting tray with baking paper or tin foil.
5. Remove excess marinade from the chicken. Place the chicken in the tray, breast-side down, and spray with a little olive oil. Roast until the top of the chicken is golden brown, for 20 to 30 minutes. Turn it over and roast another 15 to 20 minutes.

Serves four. Each serving is about 280 calories, compared with traditional tandoori chicken made with full-fat yogurt, which has about 360 calories.

ROASTED VEGETABLE MEDLEY INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups red, green and yellow bell peppers, chopped
- 1 brown onion, chopped
- 2 zucchini, chopped
- 1 cup broccoli florets
- 1 cup cauliflower florets
- 2 to 3 carrots, chopped
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes
- 1 Tbs olive oil
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp black pepper
- 1 tsp dried Italian herbs, basil or parsley
- 1/2 tsp paprika (optional)

METHOD

1. Preheat oven to 180 deg C.
2. Place the chopped vegetables in a roasting tray. Add olive oil, salt and pepper, dried herbs and paprika. Toss to combine well.
3. Roast for 15 minutes or until the vegetables are well-cooked.

Serves four. Each serving has about 150 calories.

The healthier English fish pie

INGREDIENTS For the topping

- 500g potatoes, peeled and chopped into large 2cm chunks
- 500g cauliflower
- 2 Tbs olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste



For the filling

- 1 medium brown onion, finely chopped
- 1 leek or 2 stalks celery, thinly sliced
- 2 carrots, finely chopped
- 1 to 2 bay leaves
- Olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 3 Tbs flour
- 200ml reduced fat cooking cream, milk or unsweetened soya milk
- English or Dijon mustard to taste
- 40g mature cheddar and/or parmesan cheese, grated
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 small bunch coriander or parsley, finely minced (optional)
- Salt and pepper to taste

- 400 to 500g skinless fish fillets (haddock, halibut, cod, salmon, sole or mixture) cut into chunks
- 200g smoked haddock or kipper fillets, drained
- 2 boiled eggs, quartered
- 200g spinach leaves steamed or microwaved for 2 to 3 minutes, and drained

METHOD

1. Place the potatoes in a large pot of boiling water or a steamer and cook until soft. Steam or microwave the cauliflower until soft. Mash both and combine with olive oil. Add salt and pepper to taste.

2. Preheat oven to 200 deg C.
3. In a large, non-stick frying pan, saute the onion, leek or celery, carrots and bay leaves with a drizzle of olive oil until soft and fragrant. Add the garlic and fry for another 30 seconds.
4. Add the flour, stir in the cream (or milk or soya milk) to create a creamy white sauce. Bring to a boil and simmer for 10 minutes until thickened. If the sauce is too stiff, add some milk to thin it out. The sauce should be thick and not watery. Remove the bay leaves.
5. Add the mustard, half the cheese and lemon juice and stir to mix well. Season to taste. Add chopped parsley or coriander if using.
6. Assemble the pie: Place the fish, smoked haddock or kippers, boiled eggs and spinach evenly in an oven-proof dish so that each serving will have a mix of fish, eggs and spinach.
7. Pour the white sauce over the ingredients. Cover with the mashed potato and cauliflower. Sprinkle the remaining cheese over the pie.
8. Bake for 30 to 40 minutes or until the top is golden brown. Remove from the oven and cool for 10 minutes. Garnish with parsley and slices of lemon. Serve.

Serves six. Each serving has about 450 calories compared with about 695 calories for a traditional fish pie.

Christmas in a cup

INGREDIENTS

- 1 litre fruit juice, chilled
- 300ml diet ginger ale
- 500ml diet lemonade
- Juice of 3 to 4 lemons, chilled
- Juice of 3 to 4 large green limes, chilled
- 4 sticks lemongrass, bulbous part smashed
- 4 slices ginger
- Blueberries and chopped strawberries



METHOD

1. Mix the fruit juice, ginger ale and lemonade in a punch bowl. Add the lemon and lime juices to taste.
2. Add the lemongrass and ginger.
3. Serve in glasses, garnished with strawberries and blueberries.

Makes 10 200ml servings. Each serving has about 200 calories.