

Holiday Weight Gain – Evidence is Slimmer Than Thought

The holidays are approaching, and special meals and parties are being planned. Are you worried about gaining weight between now and the New Year?

As the holiday season rapidly approaches, Americans hear more and more from the media about holiday weight gain from all the indulgences from Thanksgiving to holiday parties that span the months of November and December through the New Year. Newscasters broadcast messages that the average American gains anywhere from 5 to 15 pounds during the holiday period. Health and fitness centers advertise shedding all those *holiday pounds* by becoming a member today. And weight loss centers play to your fears of all the excess pounds we're gaining during the holidays.

While there is no question that most Americans would benefit from increasing their exercise or perhaps paying attention to over-consumption of high fat foods and excess calories, is it really as bad *during the holidays* as we are led to believe?

According to a 2000 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, holiday weight gain is greatly exaggerated. Researchers found that participants in the study did gain weight during the holiday period compared to their weight earlier in the fall, but the average weight gained was far less than the 5-15 pounds typically reported by the media.

In a study of 165 participants who completed four weight measurements over a whole year, researchers found an average weight gain of less than half a pound in the pre-holiday months of September and October and an average increase of only an additional .814 pounds during the holiday months. This total average increase of 1.2 pounds over the pre-holiday and holiday months is much less than previously thought. Less than 10% of all participants gained over 5 pounds during the holiday period and this was predominantly seen in individuals who were already considered overweight or obese.

Participants in the study underwent a variety of physical assessments from blood pressure, temperature, pulse, body weight and other psychological tests on each visit so they would not know the primary purpose of the study. While the weight gain was far less than anticipated, researchers did observe that the weight gained during the holiday period was not lost in the following year.

While a small increase of less than a pound may go virtually unnoticed to the individual or even a health care provider over a single year, it can contribute to gradual weight gain over many years if attention is not paid to healthy weight management. Therefore, it is important to apply the findings of this research with some caution.

Implications of These Findings.

Of course it is nice to know that the holiday months can be less disparaging to our waistline than previously thought, but it still remains the time period when the greatest percentage of any weight gain occurs during the year according to the researchers. And because the small average weight increase was not lost during the following spring or summer, it may help explain the long term, cumulative weight gain in most adults over many years. For those already overweight or obese, even small increases in weight can increase health risks for various chronic diseases.

Obesity and overweight affect nearly half of the U.S. population and are considered major risk factors for many chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. While the holiday period itself may not be to blame for great increases in weight, Americans can work toward managing the small increases over time. After all, it's a whole lot easier to lose a pound than to lose ten pounds!

How to Enjoy Your Holiday Parties Without all the Weight Worries! A few tips. . .

If you, along with most Americans, worry about or struggle with your weight, paying attention - but not obsessing – to your eating and exercise habits may be the key to a healthy and happy holiday season. If you're planning to attend or host some holiday events this season, you may want to try one or more of the following tips to help you prevent excess weight gain.

1. Try not to go to a party starving just because you know food will be there. This tends to lead to over-consumption. Try to eat a small, low-fat snack and drink a tall glass of water about a half-hour before the party so you don't take the fast-track straight to the food when you arrive.
2. Try not to *hang around* the food area. Continually grazing off of a beautiful display of food can almost become an unconscious process. If you love to visit with lots of people at a party, try another centrally located place to catch people as they come through.
3. Try to keep up your exercise program – even if it's just 15 minutes a day. Aim to *maintain* your weight, not to make any drastic reductions during the holiday season that can often lead to frustrations.
4. Plan ahead. If you know a party is coming up in the approaching week, plan to eat lighter for a couple of days – but *don't skip meals* or you may slow your metabolism or be inclined to eat more when the day of

the party arrives. Maybe try to eliminate snacking and/or desserts for a couple days prior to a party.

5. Remember alcohol is a source of many calories. And at 7 calories per gram, it does not offer any nutrients to the body. If you drink, do so in moderation. Try to think food first, drinks less.
6. Have fun! If you overeat on one occasion, don't stress it. Start off again on the right foot immediately! There's always another chance to practice moderation while still having fun!
7. Start the New Year off right! If you gained a pound or two, aim to up the exercise and cut back a little on the desserts or snacks for a few weeks. You can healthfully lose 1-2 pounds in a single week!

Use one or several of these tips in the months ahead – or create your own! It can be helpful to print these and display them on your refrigerator as a reminder!

Since, according to recent findings, we may not be gaining as much as we're led to believe over the holidays, we may find it easier to watch our weight *and* enjoy ourselves, too! After all, most Americans consider certain foods to be an important part of their holiday celebration! With some mindfulness and creativity, we can minimize the weight gain and stay on a track by maintaining a healthy weight range for our age, height and gender. Happy Holidays!

References:

Yanovski JA, Yanovski SZ, Sovik KN, Nguyen TT, O'Neil PM, Sebring NG (2000). A Prospective Study of Holiday Weight Gain. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 342(12): 861-867.