



## Pick Your Path to Health

### **Preventing Holiday Weight Gain Is More Important than You Think**

Did you know those few extra pounds you put on over the holidays could contribute to obesity as you get older? A new study conducted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) shows that extra weight gained during the holidays accumulates through the years and may be a major contributor to obesity in later life.

Obesity is a serious health problem for Americans, particularly for African Americans and some other minority populations. According to the latest Government statistics, more than half of all American adults are overweight with a body mass index of 25 or more. An even larger percentage of African Americans are overweight-65.8 percent of African American women and 56.5 percent of African American men. Obesity is a risk factor for heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other serious health problems.

Researchers at the NIH found that the 195 study participants each gained an average of slightly over a pound from September 1998 through March 1999, with most of the weight gain occurring during the 6 weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. When participants were weighed 1 year after the study began, they had not lost the extra weight they had gained over the holidays and were a pound and a half heavier than they were the year before.

"These findings suggest that developing ways to avoid holiday weight gain may be extremely important for preventing obesity and the diseases associated with it," said National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Director Duane Alexander, M.D.

Family and church gatherings at holiday time are an important part of African American culture. So it is a good time to pay special attention to what you eat. Maintaining your weight over the holidays, however, doesn't mean that you have to deprive yourself and live on seltzer and celery. There are a number of simple things you can do to avoid unwanted weight gain while still enjoying the holiday season.

*Don't try to lose weight*-If you are expecting to lose weight during the holidays, you may be setting yourself up for failure. Instead try to be

realistic and work towards maintaining your weight. If you weigh the same on January 1 as you did on November 25, you're already better off than most of the population.

*Keep moving*-Exercise keeps your caloric expenditure up and your stress levels down. So, it is very important to maintain your activity level throughout the holidays. This doesn't mean you need to spend more time at the gym. Just try to squeeze in activity whenever you can, whether you park at the far end of the mall lot or do sit-ups or climb stairs during commercial breaks of your favorite TV program.

*Never go to a party hungry*-Instead of starving yourself and then filling up on high-calorie, high-fat foods at the party, take the edge off your hunger beforehand by eating high-fiber, low-calorie foods. While at the party, try to limit your intake of high-fat foods like double chocolate cheesecake or fried chicken and eat more of the low-fat items like fresh fruits and vegetables.

*Strike a balance*-It's not whether you overindulge on one day that counts; it's whether your diet is balanced overall. Dietitians suggest that for every day of splurging, you need to figure on 2 days of careful eating. So, if you eat too many sweets at your office's holiday party, just eat carefully for the next couple of days.

*Stick to two drinks*-Alternate liquor with low- or noncaloric, nonalcoholic beverages. The inhibition-relaxing effect of alcohol may make it hard to stick to your eating resolutions-not to mention that liquor is also packed with empty calories. Alternating drinks, however, makes it easier to stay within the two-drink limit, and will make you drive home safer.

Keep these simple tips in mind as you go merrily about your way this holiday season. And start the New Year without the gift of unwanted pounds.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For other tips on improving your health, or for more information on the Pick Your Path to Health campaign, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>.*