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How to have a healthy Christmas party

Christmas parties are just around the corner and 'tis the season to be jolly – but if you're not careful, also the season to pile on the pounds. These days, we're all more aware of the dangers of excess fat and sugar in our diets, but traditional Christmas foods all seem to hark back to the days when nobody had to worry about their weight.

Somehow it wouldn't be Christmas without mince pies and sausage rolls, bread sauce and Christmas pudding. But in the [1960s](#), just one in 100 men and one in 50 women were obese – now the figure is more than one in four. So how can you survive the Christmas party season with your waistline intact?

On the first day of Christmas ...

Registered dietician and [British Dietetic Association](#) spokesperson, [Sian Porter](#), suggests you look at the bigger picture where Christmas party eating is concerned.

"If you know you're going to a party in the evening, tailor your eating to that for the rest of the day – stick to lighter, healthier foods so you'll have a bit of leeway when you arrive."

Many people are determined to stick to lettuce leaves and fizzy water at a party, only to find their resolve disappears in the face of a heaving buffet table.

"So assume you'll give into temptation a bit and try to balance it out," recommends Porter.

She also advises people to choose their celebrations carefully.

"Many people have been looking forward to Christmas for months, as the days get shorter and it seems forever since the summer holidays. But if you use the festive season as an excuse to binge from mid-November until New Year, don't be surprised to find the dress you wanted to wear on Christmas Day doesn't fit. Allow yourself a selection of parties and dinners where you can let your hair down diet-wise, but don't kid yourself you can eat chocolates between meals for six weeks without putting on weight."

Before you leave

Registered dietician, [Carrie Ruxton](#), stresses the importance of starting your healthy party preparation before you leave home.

"If you arrive at a party starving, you're more likely to make straight for the buffet table, or wolf down a bowl of crisps before the meal even starts. Make yourself a high-protein meal, such as an [omelette](#). Foods rich in protein help keep you feeling full for longer. It doesn't need to be huge, but it will also mean you don't absorb alcohol so quickly when you start drinking."

Eating etiquette

Once you arrive, Ruxton advises scoping out the buffet table and positioning yourself as far away from it as you can.

"Buffets can be a disaster for your diet. There's good evidence that the more food options there are, and the more people there are standing around eating, the [more you'll be tempted to eat](#). Make one trip to the buffet table and then step away!"

Having said that, the buffet should at least have some healthy options, so eat early when the salads don't look too wilted and your choices aren't limited to the left-over bhajis. This will also cut the risk of snacking on calorie-dense crisps.

Forget the fizz

Fluid can also help prevent you eating too much, but it has to be the right kind of fluid, says Ruxton.

"Fizzy drinks are full of calories, but so is alcohol. Drinking a couple of glasses of flavoured water can make you feel less hungry, but alcohol is a recipe for unfussy overeating. Intersperse alcoholic drinks with water and remember the [government guidelines](#) of 14 units a week, spread over several days."

What's on your plate?

"Party food tends to be very calorie dense," warns Ruxton. "Protein is more filling, and less calorific, than fat. Even if the chicken wings are deep-fried, they're still preferable to sausage rolls. Fill your plate with vegetables and salad before you add anything else. Add a slice of bread to make your portion look larger - there's some good evidence for [low-carb diets](#) for people with [type 2 diabetes](#), but carbs are still lower in calories than pastry."

She also advises eating [mindfully](#):

"We know people who are distracted when they eat are more likely to underestimate what they eat, and they may not even remember consuming it. Finding a quiet place to sit down so you can take your time and give your full attention to what you're eating, before launching yourself back into the party, will help."

How can you rock your own buffet table?

You can help yourself and your guests survive the party season without the bathroom scales paying the price with a little forward planning for your own party. Sian Porter's top tip is to plan your menu with colour in mind. "If your buffet table is beige, it's probably going to be unhealthy."

She recommends these easy steps for a tasty-but-healthy table:

- Put multi-coloured crudites everywhere - peppers, carrots, mange tout peas, baby tomatoes.
- Replace creamy dips with salsas or base dips on Greek yoghurt and quark rather than cream or mayonnaise. A tub of quark with a few spoons of greek yoghurt and a tablespoon of pesto makes a tasty and indulgent but remarkably healthy dip.

- Greenery is not just for garnish. Tomato, Mozzarella and basil or a beetroot-based salad add a sophisticated splash of colour to a buffet table.
- Replace crisps with large bowls of home-made popcorn (ideally use a reduced-sodium alternative to salt, such as LoSalt) – no need to tell your guests it's high in fibre and low in calories!
- Slice colourful root vegetables thinly, drizzle with olive oil and cook at 200° for a few minutes for a tasty and impressive alternative to crisps.
- Opt for mini-size portions of high-calorie foods – they look attractive and not everyone takes three ...
- Put Christmassy healthy foods such as satsumas at the front of the table, where people can reach them. The 'nudge effect' – positioning of foods to encourage subconscious healthier choices – is remarkably effective.
- Don't cover desserts with cream – leave cream and low-fat crème fraîche on the side for people to add as they want. If you are decorating puddings with cream, use aerosol cream as it's mostly air.
- Include multi-coloured fruit skewers in your menu.
- A winter compote, made with dried fruit soaked overnight in green tea and flavoured with cinnamon, feels Christmassy and indulgent.
- If you can't resist mince pies, choose open-topped ones with pastry on the base only.

The best of the rest

Of course, it's not just parties that can scupper your diet over Christmas. Let people know you don't want food gifts (chocolates are not the only fall-back Christmas present). If you are given several in the run-up to Christmas, give unopened ones away as raffle prizes or 'regift' them – you'll be less tempted in that post-Christmas gloom to console yourself with chocolate. Only open one box of sweets at a time – once a packet is opened, you'll be more tempted to dip in.

Shake it up

If you take regular exercise classes, you may find they don't run over the Christmas holidays, and it can be easy to let your [activity levels slip](#). Remember that Christmas can be great chance to get on to the dance floor, or get out of the house and clear your head (and avoid the relatives). Plan a gap in the Christmas dinner between main course and pudding, and round the family up for a brisk walk around the park.

Finally, if you do overindulge, don't beat yourself up, but do resolve not to make a habit of it. After all, you're entitled to a little enjoyment. It's not what you eat today, it's what you eat every day that counts.

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