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A feast for the health-conscious

By Tiffany Owens
Special to MSN

Want to prepare a holiday feast that tips the scales in taste instead of calories?

"Food often takes center stage during the holidays, causing fear of weight gain for many people," says dietitian and American Dietetic Association spokesperson Marilyn Tanner. "By swapping a few ingredients, even in Mom's classic dishes, you can reduce fat without sacrificing the flavor."

Here are 12 simple ways to turn your traditional fare into a healthier holiday feast this year.

Quality vs. quantity. "Rather than a buffet, plan for one elegant menu in a relaxed and beautiful atmosphere," says Purdue University food and nutrition expert Olivia Bennett Wood. "It is not necessary to have several entrees, multiple starches or desserts for guests. Go for one main dish and two side dishes, or skip a side if appetizers are served."

Tempting turkey. Choose a plain, fresh turkey over a self-basting bird to lower fat and sodium. Roast breast down and, instead of slathering with butter, consider flavoring with fresh herbs, such as sage and thyme, and basting with a combination of apple cider and Madeira or port wine. If you're really serious about fat-busting, remove the skin before carving and serving.

Gravy train. Skim fat from gravy to save approximately 56 grams of fat per cup using a fat-separator cup or refrigerate the pan juices overnight to harden and easily remove fat. Thicken gravy with three tablespoons of cornstarch dissolved in 1/4 cup water or tapioca instead of the usual butter-and-flour regimen.

Ham it up. Tired of turkey? Serve a baked (not smoked) ham. It's moist and juicy and your salt and sugar intake is dramatically reduced.

The stuffing of dreams. Whether your traditional stuffing begins with cornbread or white bread, double or triple the vegetables called for in the recipe. Use small amounts of olive oil and defatted broths and add apple cider or juice for extra moisture and taste.

One potato, two potato. For mashed potatoes, use low-fat buttermilk instead of whole milk or cream. Add some peeled garlic cloves, chives or dill weed to the potato pot for some extra zip.

Chef and cookbook author Michel Nischan recommends slipping cinnamon sticks between pieces of sweet potato for an amazing flavor. "I was sure I'd miss the butter, but I found that a roasted sweet potato is soft and lush and buttery even without it. When we're trying to eat healthfully, sometimes we

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expect to feel deprived because we think butter and cream are more significant than they really are."

Sensational sides. If you just can't part with the heavy standards like potato au gratin or green-bean casserole, substitute a few healthier ingredients: olive oil for butter, evaporated milk for cream, lower-fat cheese, or slivered almonds instead of French-fried onion toppings.

Celebrate their natural goodness (and calorie savings) by roasting vegetables with fresh herbs and a drizzle of flavored olive oil.

White out. The general rule of thumb is, the more pigmented the food, the more nutrients it contains. Serve a variety of colorful, healthy food choices.

Good cheer. If family tradition dictates a giant glass of Uncle Harold's eggnog, well then, happy holidays. But don't build in calories where they're not needed. When spirits are in order, offer guests comparatively "lean" cocktails such as mixed drinks with fresh-squeezed juice, light beer or red, white and sparkling wine, rather than excessively sugary, creamy concoctions.

Sweet nothings. Have your cake and eat it too with these simple recipe alternatives:

- Top a cake with powdered sugar, cinnamon or cocoa instead of a thick frosting.
- Cut double the amount of recommended serving size for baked goods.
- Make a one-crust pie — no top crust — or try a streusel topping instead.
- Use condensed skim milk, 2 percent or whole milk, instead of half-and-half or cream.
- Use three tablespoons of cocoa powder and one tablespoon of oil in place of baking chocolate.
- Substitute an equal amount of applesauce for at least half the oil, margarine or butter in muffins and quick breads.

Low dough. Substitute fresh bakery breads made with little or no fat for rich rolls and pastries. Refrigerated biscuits-in-a-tube and other dinner roll varieties often gather up to 50 percent or more of their calories from cheap shortenings or expensive butter.

Artificial intelligence. Conventional packaged mixes contain many preservatives, flavoring agents and artificial ingredients. While the convenience of just adding water to a mix may save time, the resulting flavor or texture may be too bland. Selecting fresh, quality foods, making a few items from scratch and adding a couple of new twists can make the difference between an average meal and a truly memorable meal.

Tiffany Owens is a freelance writer and former MSN.com editor living in Portland, Ore.

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