

**KEEP YOUR ATHLETES HEALTHY**

Christmas needn't ruin your athletes

The festive season can pose fitness problems for athletes. But they can still have a good time without packing on the pounds.

Jane Griffin offers some suggestions

FOOD and drink play a big part in making Christmas so much fun, so the festive season is not the time to decide to lose weight. That can wait until January when all the New Year resolutions can be put into operation. But there is no need to throw sensible eating plans out of the window either.

Traditional Christmas food tends to be high in fat and sugar and it can become all too easy to increase consumption to higher levels than normal. However it is a holiday time and nobody wants to be seen as a killjoy, so in this article I am going to suggest ways athletes can still have a good Christmas without a drop in fitness levels because of over-indulgence.

CHRISTMAS PITFALLS

There is a tendency at Christmas to eat more than usual. There are far more temptations to snack, with nuts, chocolates and other nibbles constantly around. Meal patterns also change so that you find you are eating more 'big' meals. Where you usually have just a light lunch of a sandwich and a piece of fruit, you find you are eating a main meal, and another one again in the evening.

You are also likely to eat foods with higher fat contents than usual and as fat contains twice as many calories as carbohydrate and protein, it is easy to see how many people gain weight at Christmas. Chocolate and other confectionery may not play a big part in your everyday diet but you may well find that your intake increases

dramatically at Christmas.

Alcohol intake may also rise and that will contribute to a greater consumption of calories. It is not just the intake either. Your level of physical activity may drop during the holiday period. You will not be following your normal routine, maybe not running to and from work, your local gym may be closed over the holiday period, or you may be staying with family or friends so that following a training regime becomes difficult. Of course the vast majority of us spend a lot more time sitting in front of the television too.

COPING WITH DINNER

Take a fresh look at the traditional Christmas dinner. A lot of what is prepared and eaten is just from habit. Would there be a general revolt if things were changed? For instance goose and duck are fatty birds so have turkey instead this year.

It is common to hear people complain that the Christmas dinner lasts for days. If that is the case, just buy a smaller bird! That way there will be less stuffing too. There is no need to let two days of Christmas spread into the traditional twelve.

How many courses do you have? Is a starter really necessary? If you do have several courses, do you need such large portions?

Many families choose to have the Christmas pudding on Boxing Day and just have a light dessert based on fruit to follow the turkey. The following are very practical suggestions that can



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help keep Christmas fare healthier than in the past – and they may even go unnoticed by everyone!

- Lay the skin of poultry to one side when carving. This is where the bulk of the fat lies
- Use skimmed milk in any sauces. Flavours such as onion and bayleaf added to bread sauce and a dash of rum or brandy added to white sauce will more than compensate for any loss in flavour from the milk
- Where previously cream has been served perhaps with mince pies or pudding use low fat natural yogurt or fromage frais. Certainly single or half creams are healthier choices than double, whipping or worst of all clotted cream, from a fat content point of view
- Instead of roast potatoes, have new potatoes boiled in their skins (a real treat in the middle of winter) or bake small potatoes in the oven (if there is enough room)
- Sausages, either as chipolatas or as sausage meat for stuffing, are traditional so instead of taking them off the menu completely, hunt out low fat brands instead, either from your butcher or your supermarket
- There are plenty of ideas for stuffings in lots of cookery books. Why not try a new one this year, perhaps based on dried apricots and breadcrumbs rather than on suet (which has a very high fat content)?
- Again it is traditional to serve bacon rolls with poultry. Choose the leanest bacon you can find and trim off as much visible fat as possible
- Serve lots of fresh vegetables but don't go adding butter to them. To tart them up sprinkle some freshly chopped herbs on top
- If you usually have chestnuts with Brussels sprouts, buy half the amount you did last year
- Don't cram all the goodies into one day. Do you really need to have Christmas pudding, mince pies and Christmas cake all on the same day? Why not have the mince pies on Christmas Eve, a small piece of cake on Christmas Day (depending on when in the day you actually have the traditional Christmas dinner) and the pudding on Boxing Day.

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

Much of the drinking that goes on at Christmas is in one's own home or at least that of family or friends. One of the great problems of drinking at home is the measures that are poured, spirits are not controlled by optics as in pubs and glasses are not standard sizes but invariably bigger. The following are some useful tips to get you in the spirit but not over-spirited.

- Buy low alcohol wines, beers and ciders if you enjoy them. Most low alcohol drinks contain around half the calories of their alcoholic counterparts but a few actually contain just as many, so be careful when selecting and buying. If you don't like these drinks, try to drink smaller quantities of what you do enjoy
- Drink wines as dry as your palate permits. The high sugar, alcoholic drinks contain the most calories
- Keep a stock of low calorie non-alcoholic drinks in the house so that when anyone feels thirsty there are alternatives to alcohol available
- Drinks can be made to last longer and the alcoholic content diluted by adding low calorie mixers such as tonic, soda, bitter lemon or alternatively just adding some fizzy mineral water. Spritzers are now highly acceptable drinks
- On days when you are at home and not entertaining, consider making them no alcohol days

ALTERNATIVE SHOPPING

Wherever possible buy low fat alternatives. Whether it is crisps or cheese, sausages or cream, there are more and more products to choose from, though I have yet to see a low calorie Christmas pudding (though I wait to be corrected!).

When you do start the food shopping for Christmas remind yourself of how many mouths you are actually going to be feeding over how many days. It is all too easy to over-estimate how much people will eat. Once the food is there, it will get eaten even if it is surplus to dietary requirements.

If you are going to buy nuts, chocolates,



Turkish delight, crystallized ginger and other similar items buy less than last year. These are extras that are not nutritionally necessary but are enjoyable, so buy only enough as a token gesture.

CALORIE COUNTING

If you are worried about piling on the pounds, remember it is important to think of calorie intakes by the week. It is the average that counts. If the day's meals add up to a 'heavy' day on calories then try to plan meals for the next day to produce a 'lighter' calorie day.

Meal patterns may be irregular but when possible aim for three meals a day, breakfast, a light meal and a main meal. When you have the main meal will be determined by the day's activities and does not really matter from the point of view of nutrition. By keeping to some

sort of routine though there will be less likelihood of snacking on high fat foods.

If you adopt a sensible low fat eating plan it does not mean there is no place for Christmas pudding and mince pies.

It simply means you have to alter your approach so that the high fat, high calorie foods become occasional foods rather than everyday foods. That way you can enjoy Christmas and stay fit, healthy and trim.

● **SEE ALSO:** Issue 2, page 49, Alcohol – the fun fuel for fitness

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