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Healthy holidays require 'mindfulness'

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Traditional Thanksgiving feasts tend to clog arteries.

But there are ways to enjoy family traditions without busting your waistband this year – first by accepting that the menu won't be within your control.

"It's hard to fight those traditional foods, but trying to be mindful is important," said Brandi Breden, a dietitian at Western Kentucky University.

Thanksgiving dinner is a good opportunity to pay attention to your senses while eating, such as the texture, smell and taste of food.

It takes about 15 minutes for your brain to receive the message that food has hit your stomach, and therefore it takes time to register that you're full. People tend to consume more calories than appropriate in those first 15 minutes, however, according to Breden.

She recommends sitting down next to your oldest relative, as they tend to eat slower than everyone else.

Another tip is to put your cellphone away. If you're socializing and chatting with your dinner table neighbors, you're more likely to practice mindful eating.

"Converse between each bite instead of shoveling the food down," Breden said.

Other tips include knowing what's on the menu beforehand to create a dietary game plan, building a plate with at least six colors and bringing raw fruit as a Thanksgiving item.

And although the chefs might be telling you to stay out of the kitchen before dinner, it's actually best to eat a healthy snack before the meal. That way, you're not starving and won't overeat, Breden said.

"Eat what you love, but moderation is key," she said. "Most people overindulge during the holidays."

For Breden, that's her grandmother's broccoli, cheese and rice casserole. "It's not healthy, I've seen her make it," she said.

In order to eat a small amount of the decadent foods, it's important for people to fill the rest of their plates with lighter, nutrient-dense options. Breden likes to start her holiday meals with fruits and proteins and end with the starchy, filling foods.

Breden's last tip is to get moving outside before and after the meal, such as tossing the football or running around with the kids.

"We tend to separate ourselves, sit on the couch, and look at what the rest of the world is doing instead of focusing on what the whole day is about," she said.

Holiday weight gain is real, though sometimes exaggerated. Nearly two decades ago, the New England Journal of Medicine debunked the notion that Americans gain five pounds, as often self-reported, during the Thanksgiving through New Year's Day period. However, people do tend to gain between a pound and two pounds, and they don't typically lose that gained weight after the holidays.

And small weight gains can add up over the years.

Nearly 40 percent of adults are obese in the U.S., and more than two-thirds of adults are either overweight or obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Because obesity causes enormous health consequences, researchers continue to strive to

understand its roots – and some scientists believe holiday eating is certainly one of them.

If interested in avoiding the bad stuff altogether, Cory Eakins, a dietitian with Medical Nutrition Therapy Inc. in Bowling Green, suggests utilizing skinnytaste.com and Pinterest to find last-minute, healthy recipes, ideally with fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables.

Eakins similarly stressed mindful eating and paying attention to the "full" signal.

"Really, people don't get sleepy from turkey, they get sleepy from overeating (and) having too many starchy carbs," he said.

And because people often overdue it, Eakins recommends exercising before Thanksgiving dinner.

"That way, you can feel better about eating the Thanksgiving meal," he said.

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