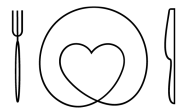


EATING DURING THE FESTIVE SEASON



IDEAS ON HOW TO
AVOID WEIGHT GAIN
THIS CHRISTMAS

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The Appetite Doctor

How not to gain weight over the festive season

Each Christmas rolls round with its own particular national and global context, and its specific meaning for each of us depending on what's happening in our own lives

Having said that, there are some constancies, such as the potential for celebratory excesses being followed by resolutions to get a grip in the new year

I thought a brief outline of how not to gain weight might be helpful, so here is my free e-book for you.

Though I am in truth writing it to remind myself how to do this!



Christmas & other feast days

This year the global background seems bleak, with war in Ukraine and accelerating climate change. The knock-on effect of what's going on globally is an alarming hike in the cost of eating and heating. For many people that will mean that Christmas excess is a distant dream, though for those of us who are fortunate to have enough, the weight-gain hazards of the coming weeks will be the old familiar ones.

In writing about Christmas, I'm writing about the biggest festival in my own year. It's the one I attach most importance to, and therefore involves the most food and drink. Although the shine may well be dimmed for all festivals this year, I have some thoughts for you about approaching your festive season, whenever that is.

Whether you celebrate Christmas, or your main festivals are at other times of year, food can become a source of both pleasure and stress, particularly when you're trying to lose weight and keep it off.



The pounds we pile on (and don't lose)

Research shows that on average adults gain weight annually, and the increase isn't steady across the year. In countries that observe it, Christmas weight gain is responsible for much of this.

A recent European study* of 1,000 people engaged in a weight loss intervention found a pattern of weight gain of 1.3% beginning in early December and continuing until the first few days of January then levelling off, suggesting that weight gained at Christmas is not fully compensated for in the months that follow.

This may not sound much, but if you now weigh 10 stones (63kg) and you gain 2lbs (1kg) each Christmas, that's an additional stone every 7 years. If you're 15 stones (95kg) now, 1.3% is about 3lbs (1.4kg) a year which means gaining a stone every 5 years, *just from the extra eating during the festive system*.

The authors of the study make the point that the excess eating during the festive season leads to long-term weight gain when it is not compensated for in the weeks following. If you do find ways of compensating for the celebratory meals and the treats you only buy at this time of year, you could perhaps avoid the seasonal weight gain.

Let me share a few ideas I have about how to do this (which I've tried myself and have worked in recent years) in case they can help you.

In the run-up to the festivities

The problem is that we have the treats on top of our normal food intake. We continue with our regular three meals a day and add the nibbles and party food on top.

Tip Think about celebratory days of eating and drinking in advance. Those days will be deviations from how you usually eat, and if you **plan** such deviations and choose particular days to indulge, you're more likely to maintain your weight overall rather than gain. Don't think of eating more on a special day as a failure; see it as part of your enjoyment of life. A single day of excess does not lead to weight gain; repeated excess eating does.

Tip On the days you do choose to indulge, think about how you might balance the day overall. One way to do this is to have a very light meal for one meal on the special days. I've discovered that a way that works for me is to have a vegetable-only meal. The simplest, quickest and cheapest way to a tasty veg-only meal is to choose your favourite vegetable and your favourite savoury sauce and have the two together. The combinations you come up with may not appeal to everyone, but the chances are that you will love them. I've written on this before [here](#). I love these veg-only meals so much that they are now a regular feature of how I eat year-round.

Buying special foods for the festive season

I've come to the conclusion that buying festive chocolates is a skill. If you have a sweet tooth, you may find yourself like - er - a kid in a sweet shop at this time of year. Combine that with an eye for a bargain and you may, as I did in 2017, buy a load of chocolates that aren't that great, but still end up eating them. How not to do this?

Tip Make chocolate buying for Christmas an event in itself – put “buy fabulous Christmas chocolates” in your diary for a particular day, and enjoy the anticipation. This year it's 19th December for me and I'm enjoying it already. Choose your favourite place to shop and when you get there, choose the chocolates people will really want. You may need to go to more than one shop (I go to three to get everyone's favourites). Go chocolate shopping on a full stomach.

Tip Don't fall for BOGOF or 3-for-2 offers unless you're happy to give the extra unintended chocolates away (your local food bank will be delighted with your extras) or put them in the freezer. And don't be swayed away from your very favourites towards the special offers – you'll end up buying more and getting less pleasure than if you stick to buying your favourites.

Having special foods in your home

Whether it's presents from grateful clients or colleagues at work, or a growing stash of tempting treats at home, these few weeks are a minefield of temptation.

"Opportunistic Eating" is the name I give to eating something just because it was there, and it's one of the five types of non-hungry eating I talk about in ["How to Retrain Your Appetite"](#).

Tip The key is to alter your environment so that whatever foods you want to keep for treats are out of your line of sight. As Professor Brian Wansink says, "In sight, in stomach. We eat what we see, not what we don't". Professor Wansink studied the effects of having food out on display around the home and office and found that many people ate more if food was easily visible.

- Put any treat foods at home in a high cupboard or one you rarely look in, so you don't get triggered to eat by seeing them incidentally
- If your opportunistic eating happens when you open the fridge, wrap the unhealthy foods in opaque containers, and having pre-cut vegetables and fruit in see-through containers makes it much easier to snack on them
- A couple of mindless treats a day less will add up over time, in terms of calories and sugar

Tip My advice about treats is always to save them for when you really fancy them, and to choose what you absolutely love. Professor Daniel Kahneman describes how the overall rating of an experience we have had depends on the "peak-end" rule. How pleasurable something **was**, when we recall it, depends the level of pleasure at the best moment of the experience and the level of pleasure at the end of the experience. The duration of the overall experience has no effect whatsoever on ratings of total pleasure, so eating a lot of something mediocre doesn't register much pleasure whereas having an intensely pleasurable experience, even if only very brief, does. And as Professor Kahneman says, "Memories are all we get to keep from our experience of living".

So choose your treats carefully and shun anything mediocre. Look forward to them and remember them with pleasure. After all, the anticipation and the reflection are both sources of extra (calorie-free) pleasure. And enhance the Peak Effect by really savouring every bite rather than mindlessly Hoovering your way through whatever's in front of you.



Eating out

You may find you're under pressure to eat more than you want "because it's Christmas"!

If you've been trying to lose weight, how can you deal with pressure from others over that celebratory meal that threatens to derail your new-found self-control? There are different types of pressure. The genuine pressure from someone saying, 'I'll have one if you have one' or 'Are you going to have chips with that?' (in a tone of voice suggesting they want chips). The other type of pressure if you're someone who tries to keep other people happy, is that you may feel imagined pressure from other people. 'S/he will feel better if I have dessert' or 'I need to order x to keep him/ her happy.'

Tip Gradually you can learn to resist overt pressure by building your ability to say no. You can do this by visualizing saying no in a friendly and firm way. This may not work immediately, particularly if you've caved in to this sort of pressure from this person before, but practice makes perfect and regular visualization can help. If you're struggling to work out how to do this, watch what other people do in situations like this and visualize doing this yourself and keep practising this skill, so it's easier when you're faced with the situation in reality

Tip When it comes to imagined pressure from others, what you need to develop is a slightly thicker skin when it comes to eating, so you focus on what your body wants, not what you think someone wants you to have. And remember you could be wrong about what they are thinking anyway

Tip Don't feel you have to finish what's on your plate if it's too big a serving. Take a takeaway box with you when you eat out, so you can feel you've got value for money and you can enjoy the leftovers all the more tomorrow



Booze

At Christmas it's easy to drink far, far more than you intended, and live to regret it. Alcohol releases your inhibitions, and your self-control. Fun if you want to let your hair down, but too much can lead to all sorts of unintentional eating as well as leaving you feeling rubbish the next day. After a couple of glasses, who cares how many crisps and nuts you eat?

Tip Two simple things can help you enjoy a boozy evening with friends, without the morning-after guilt. First, opt to drink out of the thinnest glass available. This will help you drink more slowly (people drink more quickly out of wider glasses) and help you pace yourself. Second, alternate each glass of alcohol with a glass of water. This will help reduce calories, cost and hangover all at one fell swoop.



The day itself

Your experience of Christmas Day will be influenced by all sorts of things, including what has happened in your life since last Christmas. We naturally make comparisons with the same event last year. It might be a particularly emotional day. Joyful if you're able to share it with who you most want to. Sad or even lonely if you aren't.

- Tip** Planning the day may help, whatever it will mean to you. What are your personal highlights? Focus on enjoying them. If you'll be spending it on your own think about what movie or TV you might want to watch, whether you'll want to facetime or phone someone, and what special things you'll want to eat when.
- Tip** My perennial year-round principle with food is quality over quantity, because that way you maximise pleasure (remember Professor Kahneman). Make an occasion of each snack/treat as well as each meal.
- Tip** Comedian Sarah Millican will be doing "Join In" on twitter on Christmas Day as she has done for many years now. Why that hasn't earned her a damehood yet I don't know. It's such a great idea. Her twitter name is @SarahMillican75 and she describes it as, "For anyone starting to worry about being alone/lonely on Christmas Day, we'll be doing #JoinIn on twitter. It's a hashtag we use to connect all of those who could do with some company". If you like the idea but don't have a twitter account, why not open a twitter account (it's free) just for this and then you can close it again on Boxing Day. Search for @SarahMillican75 and then either post a message including #JoinIn or see what others are posting by searching for #JoinIn. If you don't know what a hashtag (#) is, ask somebody younger than you.
- Tip** Remember you're not a snake. If Christmas usually sees you eating the biggest meal of your year, bear in mind that you are not a snake. Snakes eat seriously massive meals in the form of whole, undigested prey. But they then hide away until it's digested, even if that takes days. We humans don't work like that. We may **think** that we'll skip dinner after a huge Christmas lunch, but our internal clocks are powerful triggers for eating and most of us will be back in the kitchen within a few hours looking for our next fix. That later food, when we're still digesting the earlier one, won't taste as good as if we'd held back a bit at lunch. So as part of your plan for the day, factor in that you're human not reptile.



Boxing Day and beyond

If you're surrounded by leftovers don't do what I've done in the past and think that Christmas treats have to all be eaten (by you) by Twelfth Night. Boxes of chocolates or biscuits or whatever lying around can easily trigger opportunistic eating.

- Tip** Freeze leftover chocolates once the festive season is finished so that you can enjoy them as and when over the coming months, as an occasional treat.
- Tip** Have an honest discussion with yourself about what will happen with the other leftovers. If you're going to be eating them without much pleasure just so they "don't get wasted" either donate them to a food bank if unopened, or put them in the bin. I know, I know, food waste is terrible, but [as I explain over and over again](#), food is no less wasted if it goes through your body and into the toilet than if it goes straight in the recycling bin.
- Tip** Start enjoying next Christmas by putting next year's chocolate buying date in your diary now!



New Appetite Retraining Online course

I'd love you to join my new online course, where I share practical techniques, tools and strategies from psychology to help you change your relationship with food. There are 4 parts to the course, & you can book any number of them....

1. How to change how you eat, for weight loss (or happiness)
2. How to eat in tune with your body and mind
3. How to overcome food cravings
4. How to reduce Emotional Eating

They are recorded so you can watch them at your own pace, in the comfort of your own home. And you can go back to them as often as you like.

You can find details and how to book your place here:

[Appetite Retraining: a kind and sustainable approach to weight loss](#)

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