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Mind your portions this festive season

Our panel of diet experts weigh in on healthy holiday eating to avoid weight gain – just make sure there is 'no guilt around indulging in good food'

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As you reach for another helping of your favourite dish or another spoonful of pudding, keep in mind that 51 per cent of the weight we gain over the year piles on during holiday periods.



That reminder comes from registered dietitian Jaclyn Tsang, who adds that most people who do gain weight will never lose some or all of it.

"If you don't want to start the new year with regrets, you can still enjoy delicious food if you stay mindful of food choices and portions," she says.

Here, nutrition experts in Hong Kong comment on popular holiday dishes and their health benefits, and share their tips on how to enjoy sumptuous spreads in a healthy way.

The superpowers of plant-forward dishes

We started by asking clinical nutritionist Katia Demekhina about a range of plant-forward festive foods, including Brussels sprouts, roast potatoes, parsnips, carrots and onions, stir-fried red cabbage, and pomegranate avocado quinoa salad.

Such plant-forward festive dishes each bring their own nutritional "superpower", Demekhina says. Brussels sprouts and red cabbage are both cruciferous vegetables, which means their benefits go beyond fibre and vitamins.

"They're rich in sulforaphane – a compound that supports detoxification, hormone balance and healthy ageing. Pairing them with lemon or mustard helps activate even more of those compounds," she says.

"Roasted carrots, parsnips and onions provide complex fibres that feed a healthy gut microbiome, while onions support natural detox pathways.

Even potatoes can be surprisingly supportive: once cooked and cooled, they develop resistant starch, which acts like fibre and helps stabilise blood sugar ... another reason to enjoy leftovers the next day."
Pomegranates are one of Demekhina's favourite festive ingredients. "They're packed with antioxidants, support liver enzymes and are excellent for cardiovascular health, plus they nourish beneficial gut bacteria."
Quinoa brings complex carbohydrates and complete protein, she adds, while avocado adds hormone-supportive, heart-healthy fats.
The combination of fibre and healthy fats in dishes such as these is also key for satiety, helping control cravings and regulate appetite naturally.
She loves building meals around vibrant vegetables and plant foods alongside a good protein.
Her favourites include a radicchio, pear and walnut salad; a raw Brussels sprout slaw – she loves to have raw Brussels sprouts – with apple, shallots, pickled cranberries and nuts; broccoli on a hummus-style base with seeds for crunch; and roasted carrots on a tahini-yogurt sauce.
"We eat with all our senses – for me, it's about colour, texture and flavour working together."
Holiday dessert is non-negotiable for her. "A simple apple-and-berry crumble with an oat-and-nut topping is my go-to."
She stresses that how we feel when we eat is as important as what we eat.
"Positive emotions, enjoyment and connection actually support digestion and nutrient absorption. So no guilt around indulging in good food – pleasure is part of the nourishment."
Holidays should be a time of joy and connection, not stress over food VEGAN NUTRITIONIST AND HOLISTIC PRACTITIONER PUJA KUMARI
Focus on the joy of sharing a meal
For vegetarian/vegan nutritionist and holistic practitioner Puja Kumari, enjoying food over the festive season centres on three main pillars: nourishment, mindfulness and celebration.
"Holidays should be a time of joy and connection, not stress over food," she says.
She suggests three excellent vegetarian mains: a mushroom Wellington, a nut roast using chestnuts and an herby lentil loaf.
"Mushrooms are a nutritional powerhouse, a unique 'functional food' that provides a wide range of health-promoting benefits. Rich in antioxidants, they are a rare plant source of vitamin D, vital for bone health and immune function," she says.
"They have anti-inflammatory properties to boost immunity, and their high potassium and low sodium help regulate blood pressure."
Nuts are an excellent food source, not just for non-meat-eaters. Chestnuts offer a unique option as a gluten-free starch.
Lentils, meanwhile, are a valuable, nutrientdense pulse, often classified under both vegetable and protein groups due to their exceptional nutritional profile, she says.
"They are low in fat and calories, and high in protein, vitamins and minerals, making them another powerhouse for health."
She adds that the holidays are not a race and people should slow down and savour what they are eating.
"Take a moment before eating to appreciate the aromas, colours and textures of food. Put your fork down between bites. Be present in the moment; focus on the joy of sharing the meal with loved ones."
Hydration is key when it comes to having alcohol. Holiday drinks are high in calories and can be dehydrating. She recommends alternating alcoholic beverages with a glass of water or fruit punch to

stay hydrated and manage intake.

“I enjoy holiday treats without guilt, but I do so strategically. [For example] I opt for smaller portions of dessert and enjoy them deliberately.”

Lighter, healthier desserts promote a full feeling

Tsang, who is also a record-holding powerlifter, is all for desserts. She recommends choosing lighter, healthier versions. A top example and personal favourite is Ceylon milk tea tiramisu – an unusual and healthy alternative to the creamy, coffeeinfused Italian variety.

Her version is made like this, with measurements per one-cup serving:

Brew 30ml of strong Ceylon tea and stir in 50ml of skimmed milk. In a bowl, add a pinch of salt to 40 grams of rolled oats, and mix in the milk tea and a tablespoon of maple syrup. Cover the bowl and refrigerate for at least two hours or overnight.

In a separate bowl, whisk fat-free Greek yogurt with 1 to 2 tbsp of maple syrup until smooth.

Assemble by layers in a glass jar. Dust with unsweetened cocoa powder. Chill before serving.

“Greek yogurt is rich in high-quality protein and live probiotics, so it supports muscle repair and promotes gut health by improving digestion and boosting immunity,” Tsang says.

“The fat-free version ... is also low in calories, making it ideal for creamy desserts without the guilt. It helps with satiety to prevent overeating during the festive season.”

Fruit, nuts – and chocolate – nourish body and spirit

Registered dietitian Sally Poon Shi-po suggests some other nutritious sweet treats, including fruit and nuts, poached pears, pecan-stuffed dates, and quality dark chocolate.

Pears are hydrating and naturally sweet, she says. One medium pear provides about 5.5 grams of dietary fibre, which helps support digestion and promotes a feeling of fullness.

“For a festive touch, poach pears in spiced grape juice or red wine with cinnamon sticks, cloves and orange zest. This makes a light, elegant dessert low in sugar yet festive and aromatic. It’s one of my favourite Christmas desserts – simple, warming and naturally sweet,” Poon says.

A small handful of pecans provides around 20 grams of fats, most of which are heart-healthy fats, but she cautions that “they’re high in calories, so don’t overdo it”.

Lightly toast pecans and mix with chopped dates, she says. “Their natural sweetness and caramel-like texture make them a great whole-food alternative to refined sugar – for a dense, naturally sweet holiday snack.”

Chocolate with 70 per cent or more cocoa solids contains natural flavanols, plant compounds that help support normal blood vessel function.

“Two small squares provide roughly 115 calories. Enjoy paired with orange slices or fresh berries. The fruit adds natural sweetness and extra antioxidants. Savour it slowly,” she says.

An apple-cinnamon cake made with wholewheat flour and less sugar is another of her favourites and is rich in fibre and full of festive aroma.

She savours a cup of warm mulled wine, or a non-alcoholic version made with red grape juice, citrus and spices.

“Health isn’t about perfection, it’s about balance, variety, and enjoyment,” Poon says. “When you nourish both body and spirit, the festive season naturally becomes a healthy one.”