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Dietitians' 25 Favorite Holiday Recipes

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Looking for festive and nutritious meal suggestions for your clients? This guide to healthful holiday eating is sure to offer something for everyone.

Eating healthfully during the holiday season is likely one of the more formidable challenges your clients face. Indulging this time of year may seem harmless enough, but overloading on fat and calories in the winter months can contribute to weight gain. In fact, research has indicated that the average person gains about 1 lb each holiday season. That may not sound like much, but the same research also shows that people may never lose the added weight. Over the years, these pounds can add up—and that's where you come in. By arming your clients with a list of healthful holiday recipes, you can help them battle the bulge and still enjoy festive foods.

For most people, holiday eating begins well before the actual occasion arrives, with a variety of parties and get-togethers filling the calendar between Halloween and New Year's Day. Clients can easily develop unhealthy eating habits that are challenging to break once the season has ended.

For those who celebrate Christmas, December 25 is often a morning-through-evening day of feasting—starting with breakfast. Andrea Dillaway-Huber, PhD, RD, LDN, a nutritional counselor at Spring Ridge Medical Center in Pennsylvania, wanted to give her family a good nutritional start to their holiday, so she came up with a Christmas morning meal that was not only quick and easy but also healthful. Dillaway-Huber's **Christmas Morning Baked French Toast**, which she prepares the night before, uses whole-wheat or whole grain bread in place of French bread, egg whites instead of eggs, and skim milk in place of whole milk. She says this nice blend of dairy, protein, carbs, and fruit starts her family on the right foot Christmas Day.

Of course, Christmas dinner is often the biggest meal of the day and the one that includes the most fat and calories. But with some healthful options at the table, it doesn't have to be a diet disaster; it just takes some smart substitutions and more nutritious ingredients. For instance, Wendy Jo Peterson, MS, RD, owner of Edible Nutrition in Virginia, uses whole-wheat pastry flour for her **homemade biscuits**. Jackie Mills, MS, RD, also gets her holiday meal started right with her healthful **Wheat Berry-Cranberry Salad**. "The cranberries, green onion, and carrot make it a colorful and festive-looking dish," she says. "It's also a great introduction to whole grains for people who think they don't like whole grains. Wheat berries have a nutty, mild flavor that appeals to everyone."

Mills boils 1 cup of wheat berries (which makes about 2¼ cups cooked) until tender. She toasts pecans, combines them with dried cranberries and carrots, and tosses them all in a dressing with heart-healthy olive oil and honey. The result is a healthful but taste bud-pleasing salad that is always a hit at her holiday table.

Kate Geagan, MS, RD, author of ***Go Green, Get Lean: Trim Your Waistline With the Ultimate Low-Carbon Footprint Diet***, suggests kicking off a festive meal with **Roasted Red Pepper Soup**, which she serves in a martini glass for aesthetic appeal. "The secret to

the richness is the low-fat plain yogurt,” Geagan says. The blended ingredients, which include both red and yellow bell peppers, are garnished with small shrimp for dipping.

Susan Dopart, MS, RD, a nutrition and fitness consultant and author of ***A Recipe for Life by the Doctor’s Dietitian***, also serves soup as a nutritious starter. Her [Butternut Squash Soup](#) is hearty and filling and combines cinnamon and nutmeg for seasonal flavor.

David W. Grotto, RD, LDN, author of ***101 Optimal Life Foods*** and ***101 Foods That Could Save Your Life***, as well as president and founder of Nutrition Housecall, LLC, suggests as a main course a delicious but healthful meat dish recipe he received from chef Elizabeth Wiley of the Meadowlark Restaurant in Dayton, Ohio. This recipe for [chicken thighs](#) uses red wine, dried plums, and garlic and has only 310 kcal per serving. The dish has 11 g of fat but only 3 g of saturated fat, and Grotto says removing the skin makes it even more healthful. (The nutrient analysis was done with the skin intact.) The thighs are topped with a marinade that combines the red wine with one half of a juiced orange and chicken stock and roasted for two hours.

If your clients opt for seafood for their gatherings, especially if they’re Italian and celebrate the Feast of the Seven Fishes, Geagan suggests a Barramundi dish called [Barramundi Veracruzana](#) that’s light in calories and fat but still full on taste. (Geagan consults for Australis, a Barramundi company, but says she recognized the fish’s benefits even before she began her consultant work.) She calls it a “lean and green superfood that also packs omega-3 fats.” The Barramundi fillets are seasoned with lime juice, oregano, olive oil, and other fresh ingredients. LeeAnn S. Weintraub, MPH, RD, author of the second edition of ***The Everything Glycemic Index Cookbook***, also prepares a seafood specialty with a [Crab Spread](#) that’s big on taste without a lot of unnecessary added ingredients.

For those who are used to cranberry sauce or another sweet accompaniment to their meat dish, Dopart offers an [Apple Blueberry Compote](#) recipe, which she says is a more healthful substitute that’s low in calories and fat. She uses a mix of apple varieties—Ginger Gold, Gala, Pink Lady, and Fuji—and 1 cup of fresh or frozen blueberries. Mix the fruit with spices, dot with butter, and bake. The result is a sweet treat for any main meal. Clients can also use the compote as a topper for yogurt or cottage cheese.

Mixing Tradition and Flavor

Your clients who celebrate Hanukkah also eat special foods during the holidays. According to Bonnie R. Giller, MS, RD, CDN, CDE, president and medical nutrition therapist of BRG Dietetics & Nutrition, PC and author of ***Recipes to Remember: Heart Healthy Can Be Delicious and Passover the Healthy Way: Light, Tasty and Easy Recipes Your Whole Family Will Enjoy***, the holiday pays tribute to the dedication of a group of Jews who fervently believed in their right to religious freedom.

“Hanukkah celebrates the miracle that occurred when the Maccabees reclaimed the [Holy] Temple [in Jerusalem],” she explains. “The sanctuary was torn apart by Greco-Syrian forces. The fighters found only enough olive oil to light a lantern for one day, but the lantern blazed for eight full days. Thus, foods made with olive oil, such as [Potato Latkes](#), are celebrated during this holiday.” Giller prepares a healthful version of this traditional dish with only 38 kcal per potato pancake.

Clients of varying ethnicities likely enjoy bringing some of their own unique flavor to the table. That’s what nutrition and diabetes consultant Madhu Gadia, MS, RD, CDE, author of

The Indian Vegan Kitchen: More Than 150 Quick and Healthy Homestyle Recipes, has become accustomed to doing. When she was growing up, her family frequently prepared a special squash dish for festive occasions, and she came to associate it with the holidays. “Here in the USA, where I make my home, I make it on Diwali (“festival of lights”), and all my guests love it,” she says. “All the children that have come to my Diwali party for years now ask for it by name and request that I make enough [so] they can have some leftovers.”

Gadia says in India, her family used pumpkin to make the recipe. “But since a good cooking pumpkin is not always readily available, I find butternut squash to be an excellent substitution,” she says of the dish she calls **Sweet and Sour Winter Squash**. “Butternut squash is loaded with nutrients that have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. It is an excellent source of vitamin A, potassium, fiber, and manganese.”

For Jackie Newgent, RD, CDN, author of the ***Big Green Cookbook*** and ***The All-Natural Diabetes Cookbook***, it’s dishes with lemon, mint, and pine nuts that her mother requests each holiday. “It brings a taste of her Lebanese heritage to our table,” she says.

Newgent’s **Baby Arugula Orzo Salad**, which she takes to Christmas dinner each year, looks festive with its fresh greens and red tomatoes. “And it’s versatile,” she adds. “It can be served as an appetizer, salad, side dish, or even an entrée for vegetarians at the table. But the best part is that it uses real and delicious ingredients. And the combination of whole grains, veggies, and healthful fat make this orzo salad a nutritional winner.”

Constance Brown-Riggs, MEd, RD, CDE, CDN, author of ***The African American Guide to Living Well With Diabetes***, says she grew up eating collard greens during the holidays, particularly during New Year’s celebrations. “My mother always said if you want to have prosperity during the coming year, you had to eat plenty of greens, which represented dollar bills,” she explains. Brown-Riggs says while traditional soul food recipes call for salt pork or ham hock and bacon fat to season the greens, she created a more healthful version called **Down Home Collard Greens** that uses smoked turkey and nonstick cooking spray. “The result is far less salt and fat,” she adds.

The Old Standbys

Many people find it hard to forgo traditional favorites, one of which is the ever-popular green bean casserole that calls for canned soup and fried onions. Loaded with sodium and calories, this dish is not the most healthful choice. Instead, Sabrina Covington, RD, executive director of Healthy Kids Choice, Inc in California, suggests using **fresh green beans** with a little butter or heart-healthy spread, sea salt, and nutmeg. For some crunch, she often tosses slivered almonds on top. “Nutmeg is the key to make this dish special,” she says. “I grew up with my mom making this and it’s so delicious. The first time I was served canned green beans at a friend’s house as a child, I actually didn’t know what they were!”

Dopart says nutmeg can also be used to add unique flavor to asparagus. Her **Asparagus With Nutmeg** recipe combines olive oil, garlic powder, and freshly grated nutmeg.

Another vegetable dish that people frequently “doctor up” and transform from a healthful side into something virtually unrecognizable is Brussels sprouts. Cooks often pour heavy cream over this veggie and even top it with bacon. But Weintraub has discovered a way to add flavor without so much fat. Her **Brussels Sprouts Hash** requires sautéing the sprouts along with shallots and balsamic vinegar. Peterson has also found a way to make Brussels

sprouts more popular at her table. Her version uses [diced pancetta](#) instead of bacon. “Self-proclaimed Brussels sprouts haters never know what vegetable this is until I tell them—and smile over their shock and awe!” she says. Zested orange adds a kick to her dish. Peterson also adds some orange zest to her [Orange-Infused Sweet Potato](#) dish.

Sweet potato dishes are certainly traditional favorites but are often loaded with butter and sugar. Many sweet potato recipes also include heavy cream in their list of less-healthy ingredients. But Mary Kimbrough, RD, LD, a partner at Culinary Nutrition Associates in Texas, has created [Whipped Sweet Potatoes With Pecan Crumble Topping](#) that has plenty of flavor without all the fat. She says one of the biggest differences between her version and the traditional standby is that she uses whole ingredients instead of canned ones. “It still has a lot of creaminess and flavor but uses ... yogurt instead of so much butter,” she says. “It’s just more natural. People want to enjoy their entire meal, so they don’t want to put all their calories into one dish.”

Robin Plotkin, RD, LD, a culinary and nutrition communications expert, favors fresh sweet potatoes over canned ones in her [Honey-Glazed Sweet Potato](#) recipe, which uses heart-healthy olive oil rather than butter. Plotkin whisks together ingredients such as brown sugar, honey, and olive oil for a delicious glaze that packs plenty of punch.

Stuffing is another traditional favorite that doesn’t need to be unhealthy. Peterson took a not-so-healthy [Italian Sausage Stuffing](#) recipe she found online and substituted some more healthy ingredients. The result is nutritious and delicious.

Dessert, Too?

Many of your clients may say their favorite part of the holiday feast is dessert, so make sure you have some after-dinner recipes to recommend. For instance, Dopart has created a [Pumpkin Custard](#), which she says is a great way to enjoy pumpkin pie without the calories, fat, and extra sugar that overwhelm the traditional version. Plain yogurt makes it creamy while honey adds sweetness. Add to that some canned pumpkin, whole-milk ricotta cheese, and plenty of spices and you’ve got the same taste as a delicious pumpkin pie—without the guilt.

Cookies are a holiday favorite, but eating them is an easy way to rack up the calories. You can offer your clients a recipe for [Spicy Biscotti](#), a more healthy option with the same sweet and crunchy taste of a cookie. Developed by Deb Schiff (author of the blog ***Altered Plates***) and part of Grotto’s book ***101 Optimal Life Foods***, this biscotti is a delicious winter treat that pairs well with a hot drink. Grotto says the recipe is time consuming because of the double baking but well worth the effort. And because this version uses whole-wheat pastry flour and barley flour, it has much more nutritional value than an ordinary cookie.

Melissa Davidson, MS, RD, CD, owner of Davidson Nutrition in Seattle, also makes a holiday cookie that provides quality carbs from rich whole grain ingredients such as whole-wheat pastry flour, whole grain oats, and wheat germ. She says Jennifer Kooreny, MS, RD, introduced the recipe for [Thumbprint Cookies](#) to her when the two were students at Bastyr University in Seattle. “She said it’s a recipe that kids would love and she was right,” says Davidson. “It has since become my favorite holiday cookie recipe.”

The Thumbprint Cookie recipe gets its sweet flavor from natural maple syrup and whole-fruit preserves, and the nuts provide a high-quality source of protein. Davidson says the

cookies are ideal for kids who don't eat enough protein or whole grains. "And they freeze well and can be a quick and healthy snack throughout the day," she adds.

Nuts also make a nice holiday treat—or gift—but often come packaged with chocolate or added sugar. Grotto suggests a recipe for **Rosemary Nuts**, also created by Wiley, that combines fresh rosemary needles with cayenne, brown sugar, sea salt, and a little bit of butter. These tasty nuts make a great holiday snack.

The Right Resources

Armed with these recipe suggestions, your clients will be well prepared to enter into the holidays. A little bit of encouragement coupled with the right resources can go a long way toward helping them overcome the season's dietary challenges and enjoy foods that are as nutritious as they are delicious.

— *Lindsey Getz is a freelance writer based in Royersford, Pa.*

Andrea's Christmas Morning Baked French Toast

Makes 9 to 12 servings, depending on portion size

Ingredients

1 3/4 cup brown sugar
1/2 cup margarine
3 to 4 T maple syrup
1/4 to 1/2 cup raisins, Craisins, or currants (or mixture of all three)
1 loaf whole-wheat bread (or any whole grain bread)
10 egg whites, beaten
1 3/4 cup skim milk
2 T vanilla
Ground cinnamon

Directions

Mix and melt brown sugar, margarine, and maple syrup. Pour mixture into 9- X 13-inch glass casserole dish.

Spread fruit evenly over syrup mixture. Place bread slices over mixture, squishing slices together to fit the entire loaf into the dish.

Mix egg whites, milk, and vanilla. Pour over bread. Sprinkle with cinnamon, cover, and put in refrigerator overnight.

The next morning, preheat oven and bake at 350° F for 30 minutes. Serve with warm maple syrup, if desired.

Nutrient Analysis(based on 12 servings):Calories: 329; Total fat: 9 g; Sat fat: 1.6 g; Cholesterol: 0.6 mg; Sodium: 325 mg; Carbohydrate: 22 g; Fiber: 2.5 g; Protein: 8.2 g

— *Recipe courtesy of Andrea Dillaway-Huber, PhD, RD, LDN*

Wendy's Biscuits

Makes approximately 12 biscuits

Ingredients

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups whole-wheat pastry flour

1/4 cup powdered milk
2 T baking powder
2 T sugar
1 tsp salt
1 tsp cream of tartar
1/2 cup shortening, cold, cut into chunks (Note: Crisco and Spectrum make trans- fat-free varieties)
1/2 cup butter, cold, cut into chunks
3/4 cup buttermilk (must use)

Directions

If you have a food processor, use it; if not, use a pastry blender.

Preheat oven to 400° F. In a bowl (or processor), mix together flours, powdered milk, baking powder, sugar, salt, and cream of tartar. Pulse.

Add cold fats (shortening and butter) and pulse for 30 seconds. Mixture should resemble pea-sized crumb clusters. (Note: Be careful not to overmix biscuit dough.) Make a well in center of dough and pour in buttermilk. Mix with hands or large spoon until it comes together.

Flour cutting board or countertop and run hands under cold water to keep heat of hands from melting butter when kneading the dough . Gently knead dough no more than five times . Roll out to 1-inch thickness and cut, roll and cut, and roll and cut.

Place on a cookie sheet and brush tops with additional buttermilk, if desired. Bake for 15 to 18 minutes or until golden.

Nutrient Analysis: *Calories: 273; Total fat: 16 g; Sat fat: 7.1 g; Cholesterol: 22 mg; Sodium: 452 mg; Carbohydrate: 27 g; Fiber: 2 g; Protein: 5 g*

— *Recipe courtesy of Wendy Jo Peterson, MS, RD*