

What that comfort food can do to your waistline

We enjoy tasty food, and comfort foods - those fattening favourites and sweet and savoury treats that spend a minute on the lips and a lifetime on the hips.

It is no wonder these meals can also leave you feeling stuffed with guilt and remorse.

For many South Africans, the holiday season throws up all sorts of uncomfortable challenges. If turning to food is your way of coping with difficult family dynamics and stressful social situations, you could be setting yourself up for a heavy 2014.



(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

Like many people, you may be tempted to make bad decisions about food under stress.

All the food does in that case, is cause your metabolism to slow down, and the number on the scale to creep up, setting off a change reaction of a whole host of problems with health and self-esteem.

A body mass index (BMI) of 30 or more is considered obese, and rising numbers of South Africans are fitting into that uncomfortable category, specialists say.

Many people will gain anywhere between 3kg to 5kg or more in the last few months of the year, mostly assisted by the end of the year holiday, thanks mostly to all the fatty foods available at parties and other gatherings, says Stefanie Barthmare, a US psychotherapist at the Methodist Weight Management Centre in Houston.

"If you're not careful, those numbers could easily double very quickly," Barthmare says.

Add some favourites

Patricia Nicholas, a US dietician at Columbia University Medical Centre, says you can avoid all the psychological turmoil of overdoing things simply by adding "new favourites" to traditional dishes.

"Healthy meals can be festive as well, and hopefully, you have been making healthy changes to your diet all year."

Michelle Morgan, a dietician at Weill Cornell Medical Centre, agrees, and says the key is to "stay in tune with your hunger during holiday meals.

"If you feel satiated and comfortable - stop eating."

Of course, all that can seem easier said than done at times. But the dieticians have a holiday feast survival guide, for you - a road map of sorts to keep you and your diet from straying too far this year:

- Re-think your appetisers

Incorporate healthier pre-meal snack options. Swap the bread bowl for whole-wheat pita with a low-fat bean dip.

- Add some colour to your holiday dinner spread



"If you feel satiated and comfortable - stop

Provide bowls of exotic fruits and plates of innovative salads.

eating.' (Image: Yale)

- Choose smaller portions

You can still taste all the foods in your holiday spread without overeating. Remember, an occasional indulgence will not destroy your weight-loss attempts, and if you don't love something, don't eat it.

- The only thing that should be stuffed during the holidays is the turkey

Just because there is more food sitting around, does not mean you need to eat more of it. And if you do, then remember that a forkful of pie will do less damage than a whole piece.

- No need for second helpings

Have a calorie-free chat instead. The holiday season is a good time to engage in conversation with your loved ones - and this will not add centimetres to your waistline. Just be sure to move the conversation away from the food.

- Don't skip meals prior to a holiday party or dinner

You are less likely to overeat if you have eaten well throughout the day.

- Don't allow holiday activity to slow down your exercise programme

Take a walk after your holiday meal. This won't only prevent you from overeating and picking at leftovers; it is also a great way to burn off some of the extra calories you may have consumed.

Is it hunger... or something else?

Food can be a diversion from what is really troubling you at this time of year, say the experts.



Try to take extra care towards the end of the year, when parties are the order of the day. (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

Barthmare says that getting to the root of any problems you have, and finding better ways to deal with them without food, will help you avoid putting on unwanted kilos during the holidays.

She says there are ways to navigate through everyday problems without resorting to food. Call a friend, or read a book, Barthmare suggests.

"Take part in anything that gets you away from wanting to eat in times of stress.

"It's important to interrupt patterns that send you to the pantry."

Meeting with a counsellor or dietician will help you come up with strategies to change your ways, but a lot depends on you, your motivation, and your frame of mind.

"If it was just a matter of knowing the calorie difference between a piece of cake and a piece of broccoli, we would all be at our ideal weight," Barthmare says.

"Maintaining a healthy weight requires a disciplined approach mentally and physically.

"Finding a way to refrain from using food to help you feel better is the key.

"Unfortunately, it's complicated, and there is not a one size fits all solution that meets everyone's needs."

Source: *Business Day*, via I-Net Bridge

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