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Eating Right During the Holidays when You're on a Medically Restricted Diet

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For some people, the holidays are a landmine of problems; there are the logistical issues about where to spend them, the budget issues about how much to spend, planning issues in terms of getting all the supplies you need. As nightmarish as these issues can become, they pale in comparison to the problem patients with chronic health conditions face when holiday time rolls around.

Many of these individuals are on medically restricted diets as a result of their health problems, and this has a major impact on their celebration of the season. Since the holidays are all about dinners and parties, these patients are continually torn between staying on their approved regimen and eating whatever is put before them.



The two key concerns are sweets in diabetics and salt in those with heart failure, according to Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum, whose practice puts him in contact with patients who experience chronic conditions. He is the Medical Director of Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers Inc., senior author of the landmark studies “Effective Treatment of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia — a Placebo-controlled Study” and “Effective Treatment of CFS & Fibromyalgia with D-Ribose”, as well as author of *From Fatigued to Fantastic!* (3rd ed-Penguin/Avery, October 4, 2007), *Three Steps to Happiness! Healing through Joy* (Deva Pr, January 10, 2003), and *Pain Free 1-2-3 A Proven Program for Eliminating Chronic Pain Now* (McGraw Hill, 2006). Dr. Teitelbaum says that medications these individuals take to treat their conditions may be overwhelmed by too much sugar or salt intake.

It would seem that knowing this would prevent these patients from over-indulging. However, when these individuals deviate from their diets, it isn't always deliberate. Many times their lapses result from getting caught up in the moment. Take, for example, the scenario of eating at a restaurant. Dr. Teitelbaum says that patients with chronic health conditions often forget that some restaurant portions are as much as twice the size you would normally eat at home. In addition, desserts become more tempting when you're dining out.

So what's the solution? Dr. Teitelbaum offered these suggestions:

“Ask the restaurant to pack half of your main dish to go before they bring it to the table, or get one

main dish, and perhaps a soup and appetizer, to share between two people. For dessert, remember that it is the first one [to] two bites that give 80 percent of the pleasure. Your taste buds are saturated after those first bites, so there is not that much more taste pleasure. The rest is just habit. Let someone else get the dessert, and ask if you can have a bite or two. Then savor those bites with no guilt. If diabetic, bring sugar free chocolate with you that you can enjoy during dessert. Russell Stover, and now even Godiva, have great tasting lines of sugar free chocolates.”

Being invited as a dinner guest in someone's home can also present a challenge for a chronically ill individual. Here's how Dr. Teitelbaum recommends you handle the situation:

“For diabetics, bring your own sugar free chocolate for dessert, and simply explain that your doctor said you can't have sugar. For salt restricted diets, the amount of food added in cooking is not usually problematic. Simply avoid or take very small portions of foods that may be salty.”

Air travel may be a potential problem if you happen to fly on an airline that still serves in-flight meals. Dr. Teitelbaum says that you can resolve this with a telephone call. Many airlines offer sugar free/diabetic meals, as well as low salt options, if you call ahead and ask for them.

Meal skipping usually becomes more widespread during holiday crunch time. While it isn't an issue for heart patients, it is a serious one for diabetics because they must eat regularly to avoid both low and high blood sugar. Dr. Teitelbaum suggests that if you are a diabetic, and you may not have time to eat a proper meal, carry a bag of nuts with you to prevent drastic changes in your blood sugar level.

Finally, Dr. Teitelbaum offered the following advice to help chronically ill patients stay on their medically approved diet in spite of holiday pressures:

“As a physician, I have seen patients have almost every pleasure in life stripped from them by one health practitioner after another. It gets to the point where even if you lived to 120 years of age following all those restrictions, it's not worth it!

Because of this I have a simple policy — I do not remove anything pleasurable from the patients' diets without substituting something equally pleasurable. For example, when eliminating sugar, I substitute the natural sweetener stevia. The brand is important for taste. I recommend either the Body Ecology or Stevita brands. This is safe and healthy, coming from an herb, and you can have all you want. It also tastes great if you use a filtered brand; otherwise, it will taste like licorice. Sugar alcohols, such as maltitol (found in sugar free chocolates) are also safe and tasty. I feel saccharin is also safe, so use the Pink Packets (e.g. Sweet and Low) when eating out if you don't have Stevia with you. Though I think the jury is still out on Splenda's long-term safety, it seems okay for moderate use, and there are many brands of ice cream with Splenda. So keep your pleasure, but ditch the sugar.

For salt, it is a bit trickier, as many foods need spicing. Substitutes such as garlic and onion powders (not salts) and many hot pepper sauces work well as substitutes that make the food taste good and are healthy, where most salt substitutes taste gross. I prefer only to have the person moderate salt intake for heart failure instead of having severe restrictions, and adjust the medications to the person's diet while using natural remedies to improve [heart function](#).

As an aside, the general medical advice to avoid salt is misguided. The science actually shows that people following [low salt diets](#) die younger. Therefore except for heart failure patients, I do not recommend salt restriction.”

If you have dietary restrictions imposed by your doctor, be sure you consistently follow them. The holidays will be a much happier time without a trip to the emergency room. And if you're hosting an event, be mindful of the fact that some of your guests may have dietary regimens they must follow, and offer sugar free/low salt options. It will help maintain the congenial atmosphere for all of your invited guests.

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