

Focus on the ‘Stars’: Cooking Healthy for the Holidays

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Healthy Holiday Cooking

“Healthy” and “holiday” don’t usually find themselves in the same sentence, especially when it comes to food. But that doesn’t have to be the case. Holiday celebrations and traditions are an important part of life to be enjoyed. You can learn to reduce the large amounts of fats and sugar usually found in holiday recipes and focus more on the “star” ingredients — fruits and vegetables. With a little planning and a few simple changes, it is possible to enjoy great tasting holiday foods while still maintaining a healthy lifestyle and avoiding the weight gain often associated with the holiday season.

Focusing on Star Ingredients

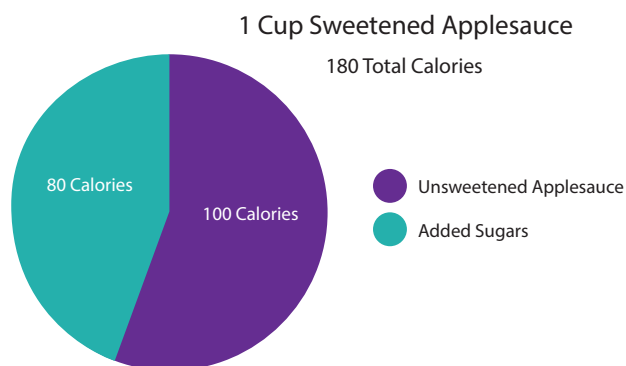
Many favorite holiday dishes — such as candied sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and pumpkin pie — begin with a healthy main ingredient. Foods such as apples, sweet potatoes, and green beans have great flavors of their own and are members of the healthful fruit and vegetable food groups. The large amounts of fats and sugars added to those fruits and vegetables cause the dishes to become less healthful. Each gram of added sugar adds 4 calories to a recipe, and each additional gram of fat brings with it another 9 calories.

The dietary guidelines at *ChooseMyPlate.gov* encourage consumers to cut back on foods high in saturated fats, added sugars, and sodium to help manage weight and lower risk of chronic disease. By focusing on whole fruits and vegetables and making some simple changes to added ingredients — such as reducing fats and added sugars — it is possible to create more healthful dishes while still maintaining great flavor.



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As a simple example, consider apples. Apples are sweet and tasty with a variety of flavors, depending on the type of apple. If you make apples into applesauce with no added ingredients, a cup of applesauce contains approximately 100 calories. However, when you compare packaged applesauce at a grocery store, you find that most varieties have added sugar, which increases the calorie content to around 180 calories per cup.



Almost everyone loves the sweet taste of sweetened applesauce. But is it really necessary to add 80 additional calories to create more sweetness in a food that already offers a sweet taste? A 160-pound person would need to walk about a mile to work off the additional 80 calories added to the cup of applesauce (<https://www.verywellfit.com/walking-calories-burned-by-miles-3887154>).

As an alternative, consider choosing to make small changes over time to create a more healthful eating style. Your taste buds can learn to enjoy foods with little or no added sugars as well as lower fat and fat-free foods. Practical changes to food you commonly eat, can improve your diet and add up to big wins over time.

To create a healthier dish, try concentrating on the “star” ingredient. It is possible to enhance the flavors with herbs and spices or smaller amounts of added fats and sugars to make tasty, yet much healthier, recipes.

Healthy Cooking Tips

Following are some tips for more healthful ways to prepare a few popular “star” ingredients in some typical holiday recipes. Comparison charts listing the amount of calories, fat, and carbohydrates that can be saved when preparing these fruits and vegetables are shown as well. The modified recipes used when making

these comparisons are in the leader’s guide (MF3088) for this lesson, which can be found at <https://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3088.pdf>

Sweet Potato Recipes

- Cook a plain sweet potato in the oven or in a microwave oven or slow cooker. Top the sweet potato with low-calorie butter spray and non-caloric sweetener. Spicy flavors also complement the sweetness of sweet potatoes. Try a low-fat pepper jack cheese or cayenne pepper.
- For easy sweet potato coins, try roasting sweet potatoes whole. Once they are firm but tender, remove the skin and slice them. Place the sweet potato slices on a cookie sheet, spray them with nonstick cooking spray, add fresh herbs and onions and then return to the oven.
- Replace some of the sugar in your sweet potato casserole filling with 100% orange juice. See the leader’s guide for the “Citrus Sweet Potatoes” recipe.
- Sweeten your sweet potato casserole with pineapple and cinnamon. See the “Pineapple Sweet Potatoes” recipe in the leader’s guide.
- A healthier substitute for brown sugar in candied sweet potatoes could be a brown sugar substitute such as Splenda Brown Sugar Blend. Since this product is considerably sweeter than regular brown sugar, start by using only half the amount.

Dare to Compare

Sweet Potato Recipes Chart

Sweet Potato Recipes	Calories per ¾-cup serving	Fat per serving (grams)	Carbohydrates per serving (grams)
Traditional Sweet Potato Casserole*	320	8	57
Pineapple Sweet Potatoes	160	2	34
Citrus Sweet Potatoes	120	0	30
Savings for:			
Pineapple Sweet Potatoes	160	6	23
Citrus Sweet Potatoes	200	8	27

*Made with brown sugar, marshmallows, and 6 tablespoons of butter.

Green Bean Recipes

- Use canned green beans with no added salt or frozen green beans.
- For a sauce, use reduced-fat cream of mushroom soup mixed with non-fat milk. Try the “Healthier Green Bean Casserole” shown in the leader’s guide.
- For the onions on top, gently cook onions in a non-stick skillet sprayed with cooking spray and use them as topping instead of French-fried onions.
- Substitute “Green Bean Sauté” for traditional green bean casserole. Find the recipe in the leader’s guide.

Dare to Compare Green Bean Recipes Chart

Green Bean Recipes	Calories per ½-cup serving	Fat per serving (grams)	Carbohydrates per serving (grams)
Traditional Green Bean Casserole*	180	12	15
Healthier Green Bean Casserole	100	4	12
Green Bean Sauté	35	0	6
Savings for:			
Healthier Green Bean Casserole	80	8	3
Green Bean Sauté	145	12	9

**Made with regular cream of mushroom soup and 1½ cups of French-fried onions.*

Mashed Potato Recipes

- Almost everyone loves mashed potatoes, but they can be another caloric pitfall. Try seasoning them with pepper and herbs and mix in low-fat margarine, fat-free half-and-half, or reduced-fat sour cream. See “Light ‘n’ Creamy Mashed Potatoes” in the leader’s guide.
- Season them with onion powder instead of salt. It gives the mashed potatoes a great flavor without the added sodium. Try leaving the skins on the potatoes for additional fiber.
- Using nonfat plain yogurt in your mashed potatoes will increase the calcium content. Try “Yogurt Mashed Potatoes” from the leader’s guide. Yogurt contributes a rich flavor and a nice mouth feel.
- If gravy for your mashed potatoes is important to your family, here are some healthier hints:

1. Use a fat-free low-sodium chicken broth. Thicken it by mixing cornstarch with some

of the cold broth, then stirring that mixture into the boiling broth.

2. To remove extra fat from gravies, put ice cubes into the broth. Then skim off and discard the oily layer that forms on top before making the broth into gravy.
3. Purchase low-fat or fat-free versions of canned or jarred gravies.

Dare to Compare Mashed Potato Recipes Chart

Mashed Potato Recipes	Calories per ½-cup serving	Fat per serving (grams)	Carbohydrates per serving (grams)
Traditional Mashed Potatoes*	130	3	23
Light ‘n’ Creamy Mashed Potatoes	80	1	15
Yogurt Mashed Potatoes	70	0	16
Savings for:			
Light ‘n’ Creamy Mashed Potatoes	50	2	8
Yogurt Mashed Potatoes	60	3	7

**Made with half-and-half cream and butter.*

Pumpkin Pie Recipes

- Use fat-free evaporated milk instead of regular evaporated milk in pumpkin pie filling to reduce fat.
- Pumpkin pie is even healthier if one avoids eating the end piece of the crust. Some may consider this to be the best part, but it also has a lot of calories. Removing the crust from any type of pie, sweet or savory, is a quick and easy way to remove fat and calories because the regular crust of a one-crust pie is about 140 calories per serving (⅓ of a 9-inch pie).
- Try baking pumpkin pie in a pie plate without the crust — it will turn out great and have fewer calories. This tasty recipe alternative, “Crustless Pumpkin Pie,” can be found in the leader’s guide.
- If having a pie crust is important to your family, try tasty crust alternatives such as using gingersnaps to make a crust instead of flour and oil. See “Light Pumpkin Pie” on the Dare to Compare Pumpkin Pie Chart to see how many calories can be saved, and look for the recipe in the leader’s guide.

Dare to Compare Pumpkin Pie Recipes Chart

Pumpkin Pie Recipes	Calories per piece (1/8 pie)	Fat per piece (grams)	Carbohydrates per piece (grams)
Traditional Pumpkin Pie*	300	12	41
Light Pumpkin Pie	220	4.5	39
Crustless Pumpkin Pie	140	1.5	28
Savings for:			
Light Pumpkin Pie	80	7.5	2
Crustless Pumpkin Pie	160	10.5	13

*Made with regular evaporated milk in pie filling, and flour and shortening crust.

Apple Dessert Recipes

- Apple Crisp or baked apples can be a healthier alternative to traditional apple pie. Both eliminate the crust, which is a large calorie reduction. Many apple pies have both a top and bottom crust so the savings is even greater than for a pumpkin pie, which traditionally has one crust.

Dare to Compare Apple Dessert Recipes Chart

Apple Dessert Recipes	Calories per 1/2 of recipe	Fat per serving (grams)	Carbohydrates per serving (grams)
Traditional Apple Pie*	380	19	51
Fall Apple Crisp	200	8	33
Slow Cooker Baked Apples	110	0	27
Savings for:			
Fall Apple Crisp	180	11	18
Slow Cooker Baked Apples	270	19	24

*Made with flour and shortening crust and 3/4 cup sugar in pie filling.

Tasty, Healthier Foods Possible
Holiday celebrations and traditions are an important part of life to be enjoyed. And choosing to use even one or two of the ideas shared in this fact sheet can

significantly reduce the calories, fat, and sugar in favorite holiday recipes while maintaining the taste you value.

Some of the modified recipes may still have more calories, fat, carbohydrates, or sodium than the average person should eat for everyday meals. However, these recipes do save calories compared to the traditional recipes, and they are healthier alternatives. The point is, saving a few calories here and there (along with being a little more physically active for good measure) can add up to little or no holiday weight gain and a more healthful lifestyle for you.

Practice focusing on the “star” ingredients — the fruits and vegetables. With a little planning and creativity, you can enjoy great tasting holiday foods and still maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Resources:

- Choose MyPlate, United States Department of Agriculture, www.ChooseMyPlate.gov
- Epicurious website, www.epicurious.com/recipesmenus
- Fix It Fresh! Fruits and Vegetables Recipes series, Mary Meck Higgins, Ph.D., R.D., L.D., CDE, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Nutrition, Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, Manhattan, KS, <https://www.rrc.k-state.edu/nutrition/doc/Fixitfresh813.pdf>
- Eat Smart, Move More North Carolina, <https://www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com/>
- The Good Housekeeping Cookbook, edited by Zoe Coulson, The Hearst Corporation, Copyright 1973
- Healthy Holiday Cooking, University of Nebraska, Lincoln Extension, www.extension.org/pages/24761/healthy-holidaycooking
- Healthy Thrifty Holiday Menus; SNAP-Ed Connection Recipes, USDA, <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/nutrition-education/healthy-thrifty-holiday-menus>
- New Revised Edition Taste of Home Cookbook, 2008, Reiman Media Group, Inc., ISBN 978-089821-666-0
- Very Best Baking website, <https://www.verybestbaking.com/recipes/find>
- Walking Calories Calculator, <https://www.verywellfit.com/walking-calories-burned-by-miles-3887154>

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