

Healthy Eating

How to keep weight off during the holidays

By Kari Bachman

This time of year we face many opportunities to eat foods laden with fat and calories. It's often said that adults gain three to five pounds from Thanksgiving through New Year's day.

However, the truth is quite different. In a study conducted by the National Institutes of Health, subjects gained an average of just under one pound during the holiday period.

But don't celebrate the news with another bizcochito. The study also revealed that that extra pound generally never gets burned off after the holidays. Add up the pounds from all the years, and the outcome of this small yearly weight gain becomes apparent.

What can we do to keep the scale from creeping higher and higher? Those people in the study who did not gain weight reported that either they were more active during the holidays, or that they felt less hungry during the holiday season than before the holidays began.

The first concept makes sense: when we're more active, we burn more calories and we tend to lose weight. Try biking around the neighborhood each evening to take in the beautifully lit houses. Rather than joining friends at a holiday party, organize a group hike in the countryside.

It may be a bit harder to understand how to feel less hungry. The key is not to think of food as the center of celebrations, nor as a salve that eases our stress, loneliness, and other difficult emotions. Instead, try to emphasize other elements of the season. For example, organize a group of friends to do some volunteer work together. When we are more connected to our communities and families, we don't need to use food to feel good.

Everyone knows it's easier to prevent a fire than put one out. It's the same with weight gain: avoid putting on excess pounds instead of struggling to take them off later. Raise your level of physical activity and think less about food during the holidays, and you'll be forming two habits that will serve you well in the New Year.

Kari Bachman is a nutrition program coordinator with New Mexico State University's Cooperative Extension Service. She can be reached at (505) 646-2009, or by e-mail at kbachman@nmsu.edu.