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Moderate

Your Holiday Moderation

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ith the holidays now upon us, Halloween through Easter can be a popular time to play the moderation card and slack off on diet, exercise and your (hopefully) healthy lifestyle. But it's actually a time

when your diet should be the healthiest and "cleanest," as cold temperatures, travel and holiday stress can take a toll on your well-being.

"Everything in moderation" is a common line used by people trying to support their decision to eat and live a certain way while simultaneously trying to justify their lack of discipline and dedication to their health to others. During the holidays, many people travel excessively, consume foods and alcohol they normally wouldn't and/or shouldn't, attend numerous parties and family gatherings, and forgo exercise and movement. Soon, their idea of moderation becomes immoderation, and their health and fitness falter.

HEALTHY MODERATION

You don't need to live in an isolated, air-purified bubble and eat in a perfectly clean and natural way all the time to be healthy. However, in reality, there are many products that have no place in your diet of "moderation" if you wish to be as healthy as you possibly can. On the other hand, this also means that you need not deprive yourself of desserts and good-tasting food in the context of a healthy and nutritious diet.

High-cacao-content chocolate, maple syrup and honey all have their place in a healthy diet. But foods with refined sugars, high fructose corn syrup, and yes, even agave, have no place in a healthy diet—even in moderation. (Agave is super processed and has more fructose than high fructose corn syrup.) So swap out those sweeteners for pure ones. You can eat them now and then, depending on your health, your activity level and how well you metabolize and digest those foods.

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

Listening to your body means that if you eat something sweet and turn irritable or into a raging lunatic, then hey—you shouldn't eat that! If you get tired after eating sweets, even honey or maple syrup, then they're not for you. But if you feel fine after some treats made with these real ingredients and you don't have any health problems to which they may contribute (such as pain, inflammation or a named disease), then by all means indulge—in moderation.

These foods also have a place in high-intensity and long-duration exercise programs. So if you just ran a marathon or exercised hard for an hour or longer, having a sugary snack afterward to replace glycogen is often warranted—just not one loaded with processed ingredients and fake colors and flavors. So how about some sugar after a one-hour walk? Nope. If you need (or crave) sugar after that or any other light exercise, then you were exercising anaerobically (at too high an intensity) and you need to work on your fitness training, not support it with the wrong foods.

Artificial flavors, colors, preservatives and lab-made chemical sweeteners such as sucralose (Splenda) and aspartame (Nutrasweet) should never be a part of your diet. These sweeteners are hundreds of times sweeter than sugar, and they support sugar cravings in individuals and even increase insulin levels. There's even good evidence that these sweeteners alter gut bacteria and increase blood sugar levels even though they're not actually sugar!

YOUR THANKSGIVING DAY TURKEY COMA

Many people still associate eating turkey during Thanksgiving with the brain and body fatigue they get after the big feast. However, the amino acid tryptophan in the turkey is really not the culprit for the post-dinner coma. All the high-carbohydrate foods, especially the sugar (including alcohol) consumed during Thanksgiving stimulate the release of insulin, which then carries most of the other amino acids from the blood into the muscles, except for tryptophan. Left hanging out in the blood, and now unopposed by other amino acids, tryptophan is allowed to cross the blood-brain barrier. When it gets to the brain, it triggers an increase

in the neurotransmitter serotonin, which has a sedating effect on your body. (Think Lexapro and Prozac, if you're familiar with these common SSRI medications.) Furthermore, this increase in serotonin can increase melatonin levels, making you sleepier. Melatonin is the hormone made by your pineal gland at night when it is naturally time to sleep.

But there's more than the insulin-triggered accentuation of tryptophan-serotonin that causes post-meal drowsiness. All the insulin-producing potatoes, stuffing, gravy, cranberry sauce, pie and other carbohydrates you eat will cause your blood sugar to eventually come crashing down, and you'll become even more tired. Actually, over time, too many carbs, especially those refined carbs, can lead to depression—almost like Thanksgiving every day in your body, and that's not a good thing. Then to add insult to injury, realize that your body cannot store all this sugar as glycogen for later use, nor can it be used immediately for energy, so it must store it as fat. Yep—good ol' fat on your body. This process also demands energy, so you'll feel even more depleted physically and mentally as your body works on making you fatter.

The sugar-insulin-tryptophan connection is also the reason why a warm glass of milk before bed helps some people sleep. It's the milk sugar (lactose), not the calcium or any other nutrient in the milk. This is the same reason some nice hotels offer a candy on the pillow or a cookie before bed to their guests. (Yeah, it's a nice gesture, too.)

HEALTHY HOLIDAY FATS

How about those vegetable/nut/seed oils—the refined ones found in so many products? Many of these oils are genetically modified (GMO), and while no one is exactly sure of the health impact of such modification, most of these fats are also inflammatory, especially when combined with the sugary, carbohydrate-rich foods in which they are often found. These oils (corn, peanut, soy, safflower, canola, sunflower, cottonseed and grapeseed) have no place in a healthy household pantry, yet they are definitely hard to completely omit from your diet when you venture outside your home.

So moderation has its place here, but it should be contained, and it definitely depends on where you choose to eat. If you're grabbing a common Whole Foods product with canola oil now and then, maybe that's okay, but the less you consume, the healthier you'll be. If you have health problems, even if you just feel tired, achy or “old,” then your consumption of these oils should be close to, if not absolutely zero. Of course, if you're eating at some fast food or box-type restaurant, you're likely to be consuming oils such as soy and corn, which are much healthier than canola. Partially hydrogenated oils (trans fats) should never be consumed. Cottonseed oil should be left for textile processing, not for human physiology. Remember, all these oils are refined and processed so they can be used for cooking; they're far from their natural, unaltered states.

Butter, coconut, red palm, lard and other pasture-raised animal fats (such as duck) are the only fats you should be cooking with. Extra virgin olive oil and

unrefined, untoasted sesame seed oil are great fats to add to dishes after cooking. You can heat the olive oil a bit (keep it under 325°F) but never the sesame seed oil as you'll destroy the benefit of the sesamin, which acts as a natural anti-inflammatory.

DRINK MERRILY IN MODERATION

Caffeine and alcohol are common substances that are very individualized when they pertain to health, and moderation is a somewhat gray area here. If you need caffeine to give you energy, then you're past your point of moderation. The same goes if you need alcohol to alter your mood or wind down at the end of a long day. If you have a withdrawal headache without your typical cup(s) of joe, then again—too much. Interestingly, the more stress you're under, the more that caffeinated substances will tax your adrenal hormones, and the more you'll desire caffeine (which is a drug!) to make up for that missing energy source. There are also nervous-system stimulants called methylxanthines in caffeine-containing products that can hinder your health even further.

What “moderation” means when it comes to caffeine and alcohol is relative to your stress level. If your stress is higher than what you can handle, then that's what you need to moderate first. Of course, when it comes to alcohol, moderation should always play a part. And don't forget that alcohol is a sugar, so it falls under the guidelines mentioned earlier.

ALWAYS A PARTY SOMEWHERE

Say you're at an office holiday party, or your kids are at a friend's birthday, where there's a traditional cake made with refined and bleached flour, artificial frosting and hydrogenated oils. It's okay to use the “everything in moderation” line, right? I'd disagree, as difficult and perhaps uncomfortable as it may be. Why teach your kids to eat like the unhealthy masses that are often sick or taking a medication, most likely in large part because of their diet of moderation (excess in many cases)? My kids take a pass and bring their own treats to celebrate. They don't need to give in to the peer pressure of an unhealthy practice—and one that is *more* than “in moderation,” especially at this time of the year.

There are excuses every weekend, if not daily, to indulge in foods that are truly damaging to your health. Moderation soon becomes a habit, the habit becomes poor health, and the poor health becomes a disease. A diet of unhealthy moderation will leave you more susceptible to the flu, winter depression, weight gain and a slew of other health problems, including perhaps the start of a major disease.

So the point here is this: Moderation has its place in every aspect of health—diet, exercise, sleep, work, play and so on. Let's not abuse the “everything in moderation” cliché as an excuse to consume foods that are truly detrimental to our health. If you can't grow it, stay away from it. If you can grow it and it has been altered (including being sprayed with pesticides or herbicides), be aware of the consequences it may have on your health. Real, unaltered foods are where moderation has its place, based upon how you feel, react—and of course, how much you enjoy the food. 🍷



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