



HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

DITCH THE GUILT: 7 SURPRISING REASONS TO ENJOY HOLIDAY MEALS

By *Your Health Staff*

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The holidays are a hard time to avoid extra calories and a few added pounds, with seasonal sweet treats and festive, food-laden occasions around every corner. Moderation is key this time of year—but studies show there's also nothing wrong with the occasional indulgence. On the contrary, allowing ourselves to enjoy special meals and mindful "treats" now and then has proven psychological *and physical* health benefits.

Redefining Holiday Eating: Balance, Not Restriction

Put simply: you shouldn't feel like you need to "earn" your calories for a holiday meal. In fact, "food guilt" and the restrictive dieting that comes with it often lead to higher levels of stress and anxiety around food, which can result in overeating and weight gain in the long run.

"Holiday meals and celebrations are meant to be enjoyed, not to spark guilt. Food is more than just nutrition—it's about tradition, connection, and enjoyment," said Allison Bray, MS, RDN, LDN, CNSC, Director of Adult Nutrition Therapy at Methodist Healthcare. "When people allow themselves to eat what they enjoy on special occasions without restrictive rules, they're less likely to overeat or feel deprived. Mindfully embracing these meals can foster a healthier relationship with food and support both mental and physical well-being."

The Science Behind Guilt-Free Holiday Eating

Research shows that consistently balanced nutrition is key to long-term health, which means there's room for an indulgence here and there, enjoyed in moderation and sans the guilt. Read on to review [Healthier 901's](#) seven evidence-based reasons you're better off savoring the flavor this season than restricting yourself at every meal:

1. Special Occasion Meals Have Minimal Long-Term Impact

Research shows that occasional indulgences, like holiday meals, don't significantly impact long-term health or weight when balanced with an overall nutritious diet. Regular eating patterns are what influences health most, so a guilt-free holiday meal or two won't derail your long-term goals. If you'd like help creating a nutritionally balanced meal pattern, meet with a registered dietitian ([901-516-6357](tel:901-516-6357)).

2. Stress from Food Guilt Can Be Harmful

Our mental and physical health go hand in hand, and food-related guilt and stress release cortisol—a hormone linked to increased appetite, fat storage and higher levels of inflammation. Relaxing about food choices, especially on holidays, can actually be healthier for us in the long run by lowering our stress levels.

3. Restrictive Dieting Can Lead to Overeating

Studies indicate that restrictive dieting often backfires, leading to heightened cravings and overeating once restrictions lift (or temptation prevails). Allowing yourself to enjoy holiday foods without guilt may reduce the likelihood of binge-eating behavior and improve overall satisfaction.

4. Enjoying Food Freely Can Help Heal Food Relationships

Embracing holiday eating without guilt can support a positive relationship with food by affirming that *enjoyment is a valid part of eating*. Building a balanced mindset around food can reduce the cycle of restriction and overeating, encouraging a healthier, lower-stress approach to eating.

5. Savoring Food Improves Digestion and Satisfaction.

Eating without guilt promotes mindfulness, which research shows enhances digestion and leads to feeling fuller and more satisfied. This feeling helps avoid the urge to continue eating past fullness, as our body's satisfaction is recognized and appreciated.

6. Holiday Eating Can Be a Joyful Social Experience.

Sharing meals with family or friends is integral to social well-being and happiness. Studies highlight the importance of communal eating in enhancing mental health, reducing loneliness, and promoting positive emotional states—all of which contribute to overall wellness.

7. Body Cues, Not Guilt, Are the Best Guide.

Many dietitians advocate for "intuitive eating," or listening to the body's cues to guide our food choices. Evidence shows that people who eat based on their body's natural cues, rather than strict restrictions, tend to have healthier weights and better relationships with food over time.



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Breaking Free from Food Guilt

So, as you begin decking the halls and cruising the (online) malls this season, we hope you'll keep in mind that our bodies are resilient and able to adapt to occasional increases in food intake—especially when balanced by healthy eating habits the majority of the time. And, if you're having trouble breaking old habits around restricting eating, check out Healthier 901's [free micro-course on rewiring your brain](#) for proven tips to replace negative, unhelpful thoughts and behaviors.

To access more healthy lifestyle resources, including nutrition tracking tools, [workouts on-demand](#), community fitness challenges and more, join the [Healthier 901 movement](#) today.

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