

AT THE HEART OF THANKSGIVING

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Thanksgiving brings memories of family, friends, food, traditions and long lost emotions. But ask anyone who has crossed paths with heart disease – it also brings back unpleasant memories of difficulty breathing, ER visits, hospitalizations and a foreboding about surviving another holiday season. As a physician who has cared for patients in the holiday season – I can assure you that the terms Holiday Heart syndrome, deadly Thanksgiving dinners, Hanukkah Heart attacks and Christmas Coronaries are not sassy terms from TV shows.

What do these scary, catchy phrases mean??

1. Christmas coronaries or Hanukkah heart attacks are heart attacks that occur after overindulging in huge holiday dinners. Studies suggest that limitless overeating in even one meal can more than double your chance of having a heart attack the same day.
2. Holiday Heart syndromes are abnormal heart rhythms that occur after excess alcohol intake, especially on top of large fattening meals.
3. Deadly holiday dinners are mammoth high calorie dinners full of sodium which precipitate fluid retention in the body, often resulting in heart failure.

How to enjoy a Healthier Happier Holiday season:

1. As the Holiday HOST: Plan ahead and make healthier choices.
 - Swap Ham for Turkey
 - Swap butter for vegetable or olive oil with minced garlic and chili flakes. Swap heavy cream for low fat milk / low sodium chicken stock in mashed potatoes.
 - Use fresh herbs, citrus, sodium free seasonings - cut down on salt. Rosemary, sage, thyme and parsley bring in the warmth of Thanksgiving without the calories.
 - Have salads with dressing on the side and a few grilled or baked vegetable sides (green beans, Brussels sprouts, mushrooms, squash and pumpkins are a few options).
 - Make homemade cranberry relish with apples, fresh orange juice and zest.
 - Serve smaller individual portions of dessert in elegant champagne flutes and try to have at least one fruit dessert option.
 - Plan fun post-dinner activities.
 - Serve water with added flavors like basil leaves and lemon/orange slices, and flavored coffees as alternatives to wine after dinner.
2. As the Holiday GUEST: Planning and portion control are key.
 - Plan ahead and get active before the holiday season.
 - Have a high protein breakfast and a high fiber protein snack 1 hour before dinner.

- Bring in some healthy side dishes.
 - Use smaller salad plates instead of dinner plates.
 - Load up on salads. Go easy on the dressing- just dip your fork in the dressing.
 - Try everything in small portions and indulge in the healthy vegetable side dishes.
 - Go for light meat. Skip the skin.
 - Minimize fried food intake
 - Eat slowly while enjoying the people and conversations around you.
 - Try fruit for dessert or one small portion if you can't resist.
 - Have a partner or your smart phone keep track of your indulgences. Having to log all your intake will dissuade you from going overboard completely.
 - Watch and limit your alcohol intake.
 - Have a designated driver.
3. Post Thanksgiving: If you indulged a little - just get back on your exercise routine and burn off excess calories before the holidays. Forgive yourself, and get back to your routine.
 4. Avoid eating unhealthy while shopping on Black Friday.
 5. Most importantly, DON'T IGNORE YOUR SYMPTOMS – call your doctor if you have chest discomfort, difficulty breathing, excess fatigue, palpitations, swollen ankles or weight gain of more than 2 lbs/day.

Together, let us make healthier traditions- Cherish friends and family instead of fretting over food and old feuds. Practice gratitude and grace over gluttony. Let us be truly thankful for everything around us.

- Try this fun Holiday calorie counter from Washington Post - <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/health/holiday-calorie-counter/index.html>

References- Heart.org, goredforwomen.org, mayoclinic.org, clevelandclinic.org.