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There's a common denominator in everyone's lives: food. Each of us may approach the need for food, the type of food we eat, the meaning of food, and our relationship with food differently, but we all need sustenance of some type to survive.

Since we all have to eat, it can be a slippery slope to eat well – or at least, not overeat, when you're confronted with a variety of food choices; family expectations and heritage; the eating habits of your friends; an encyclopedia of cultural, religious, and family traditions; your interaction between food and emotion, and your personal dietary needs.

Do You Worry About Losing – Or Not Gaining – Weight?

Realistically, one over-the-top eating event (like Thanksgiving dinner) matters very little in the grand scheme of things. A daily intake of excess calories over weeks and years end up being extra pounds on your body, but when you overeat at one meal the impact is negligible.

It's the inevitable mindless eating – those daily extra bites, nibbles, and calories from the treats on the receptionist's desk, the gift of peanut brittle, the celebratory toasts, the second and third helpings, the birthday cake in the in the snack room, that are the "diet busters."

When the food's in front of you it's hard not to indulge.

See it = eat it.

Why Do We Eat So Much (or are tempted to eat too much) – even when we're not hungry? Here are some very common reasons. How many can you relate to?

- **What Time Is It?** You might not realize it, but your body generally likes routines and your brain likes structure. One reason you're hungry at noontime is because you've taught your body to expect breakfast, lunch and dinner around the same time every day. So you eat at the appointed hour – hungry or not.
- **See It = Eat It:** Your body anticipates when and what kind of food is coming. Doesn't your mouth water thinking about 4th of July barbecue or the hot cheesy pizza from your hometown hangout? How difficult is it to **not** eat once your mouth is watering and the thought of a particularly appealing food gets into your head?
- **Variety Is The Spice Of Life:** If you chow down on a large meal, how is it possible, as full as you might be, that you still make room for dessert? Probably because your desire for something sweet hasn't been satisfied. Monotony often leads to searching for something different. Have you ever been on a diet where you eat the same thing all of the time? What generally happens when you can't stand it any more? Enough said.
- **Doesn't That Look And Smell Delicious?** Sight and smell can start a cascade of appetite signals. The wafting scent of something delicious is one way your body knows that food is close by. This can trigger insulin secretion – which makes you think you're hungry. If you think you're hungry, you eat.

- **Alcohol:** Beer, wine or liquor can impair your judgment, which often results in eating more. Watching what you eat is harder if you've been drinking. And, alcohol has calories (7 per gram) – which are often not taken into consideration.
- **It's Cold Outside – Or In The Restaurant:** Have you ever walked into a restaurant and felt like you were going to freeze? Restaurants often intentionally keep the thermostat set low because the colder the temperature, the more you tend to eat. Heat can act as a satiety signal. Your metabolism tends to drop when it's time to eat and eating warms you up.
- **Candy, Pasta, Cereal, Bread, Cookies; Refined Carbs and Sugars; A Whole Lot Of White Stuff:** If you eat a meal that's filled with refined carbohydrates like white pasta or white rice, in only a few hours your body may crave food again. Simple carbohydrate foods are digested quickly, which causes your blood sugar to spike and then drop. When your blood sugar crashes, you're a lot more interested in food because your body is sending messages to take in food to help raise blood sugar levels again.
- **Habits and Routines:** Doing the same thing each day, taking the same route home, going into a restaurant with a certain specialty, walking into Mom's kitchen and heading straight for the cookie jar, are all habits or routines. For instance, many people find that changing up the route home – avoiding passing right by their favorite bakery or ice cream parlor – will eliminate the craving for a food that had become part of an afternoon routine.
- **Traditions and Celebrations:** Somehow special events scream, "All filters, guards, restraints, and rational thinking are

dismissed for the event, day, or season.” Think about the last wedding you went to, or a 4th of July barbecue. Did you eat and drink more than you wanted to – or should have? Why? For many of us a special occasion signals eat and drink without constraint.

- **Happy, Sad, Spurned, Rejected, And Any Emotion In Between:** Yep, emotions. Emotional eating is frequently a way people suppress or soothe their stress, anger, fear, boredom, sadness, loneliness, and a whole spectrum of emotions. High calorie, sweet, fatty foods, often in large quantities, tend to be the choice of emotional eaters.
- **The Bottom Line:** Most of us have times when we eat when we’re not hungry. Sometimes it’s a one shot deal – or maybe it happens annually, on holidays or family reunions. Our bodies compensate for episodes of overeating. And you can build in checks and balances, too. If you’re going on an awesome vacation where the food is guaranteed to be delicious or if you look forward to your Aunt’s peach pie at your yearly family reunion, you’re not going to turn away. You’ll end up being miserable and overcompensating later on by chowing down on everything in sight. So have a game plan that allows you to have those special foods. It just requires some thoughtful planning, choices, and perhaps a bit more moving around.

Create Your Own *foodMAP*: your guide to enjoying holiday and celebration food without overeating

Use the following guidelines to develop your personal Eating *foodMAP*. Most of us “freak out” at the idea of gaining weight – or certainly overindulging – on holidays, on vacation, or at special events – but we never take the time to figure out our specific problem areas.

Once you know, you can create a plan that will allow you to enjoy special event eating without the constant worry about what the scale is going to show – or how tight your clothes are going to feel.

Highlight the areas of difficulty that these questions provoke and use them to formulate a plan or some strategies that will help you navigate your particular food pitfalls.

Directions:

Your **Personal *foodMAP*** is a template you can use to take inventory of what, where, when, and why you eat – any time of the year, but especially on holidays and during celebrations or vacations. You can then use that information to think about how you would like to handle difficult or tempting eating situations.

There are two sets of questions for you to answer about your eating behaviors, preferences, and traditions. Jot down your answers in the space provided to pinpoint your unique eating challenges or eating behaviors that you would like to modify.

At the end of this template is a space for you to write down those challenges, what your goals are, and the realistic way you can achieve those goals.

Part 1: What is your mindset about holiday or special event eating?

1. Lots of food = good time?
2. Not so much food = bad time?
3. Do you know that you're going to overeat before you get to an event?
4. Can you enjoy yourself without trying everything on the table?
5. Is your holiday eating intertwined with the need or obligation to cook or entertain family and/or friends?
6. Do you eat because of tradition – because you've been eating the same food at Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or at family reunions since you were a kid? What are your reasons?
7. Is it your family's idea or yours that "party or holiday" food has to be eaten in tremendous quantity (for instance: a meal has to include stuffing, two types of potatoes, five desserts, or six types of candy).
8. Do you think it's non-celebratory if you don't overindulge and eat three desserts at Christmas or raid your kid's Trick or Treat bag?
9. Can you pass up "special" food that's there for the taking: at parties, on receptionist's desks, as sample tastes while you shop?
10. Do you eat when you're not hungry just because it looks and smells delicious?

11. Do you eat something even if you know that if you eat it you'll feel awful later on? Do you even like all of the food that you feel obliged to eat?
12. When you eat a particular food (or large quantities of food) – do you feel that someone else is compelling/forcing you to do so (your parents, your partner, your best friend)?
13. Do you think you won't have a good time, that you'll be labeled a party pooper, or that you'll offend your mother-in-law if you don't eat everything in sight?
14. Do family gatherings or certain people or groups make you lose control of your eating? Which ones or which people?
15. Do certain environments prompt you to (over)eat? Which ones?
16. Do you eat because you're hungry or are you eating out of boredom or as a means of handling stress?
17. Do you ever plan for what you might eat – or is it always figured out "on the fly"?

FACT: It takes approximately 3,500 **extra** calories (above and beyond your normal calorie needs) to gain about a pound. Many of us eat more than 4,500 calories and 229 grams of fat on a holiday from a combination of snacks and a traditional holiday turkey dinner with all the trimmings (without breakfast or leftovers).

Most extra holiday or celebratory calories don't come from the "day of" holiday or event meal but from unrelenting nibbling over a holiday season, vacation, or extended period of stress.

It's way too easy to add on 500 extra calories a day -- which (depending on your activity level and other factors) can translate into around pound in a week ($7 \times 500 = 3500$ calories, or 1 pound. Please note that this is an approximate formula with many variables).

Part 2: Why, what, where, and when do you usually eat and drink during holidays, vacations, and celebrations?

1. What, when, and where will you choose to eat and drink?
When, where, why, and how much? Every decision is yours; take control.
2. What's good for your body and what will make it feel awful?
3. Approximately how many calories are in your favorite indulgences? Look them up and then decide whether you want to indulge or not. List your favorite indulgences and their approximate calories here.
4. List the traditions that you honor/celebrate that involve food. Can they be modified?
5. How will you politely refuse or not feel obliged or guilty when asked or pushed to do/eat/indulge in what your partner, parent, neighbor, or sibling is eating?
6. Does stress make you eat? What are your main stressors and how can you handle them?
7. What 150-200 calorie snack with some protein and fiber will you have before you go to a holiday party or dinner so you don't arrive feeling ravenous?
8. How will you – or won't you -- practice portion control?
9. Will you pile your plate high with the lower calorie vegetables and take smaller amounts of the higher calorie foods? List your favorite lower calorie and higher calorie foods here.

10. Identify and list your trigger foods: the foods that you can't resist and that prompt you to eat more (and more . . .)
11. What simple calorie sparing swaps can you make in the food you prepare and the food you choose at parties and in restaurants?
12. What are your main sources of mindless calories -- those random nibbles from the treats on the receptionist's desk, the neighbor's homemade peanut brittle, the office party holiday toasts, the second and third helpings, or the holiday cookies in the snack room? List them here.
13. What special foods will you give yourself permission to eat, without guilt, on holidays or at special celebrations? If you know that you're going to indulge try to decide early in the day what or when you will have your treat and stick with your decision. If you wait until later in the day when all the food is right in front of you and you're hungry and tired, you'll find that your resolve is not quite as strong.
14. What activity can you build into your day -- that you will honestly do? Exercise generally won't compensate for overeating (it takes a lot of exercise to burn off significant calories) but it will help stabilize your weight and your intentions and boost your mood. List some activities and when you can do them.
15. What will you do with leftovers after you've prepared a big meal -- or when a well-meaning friend or relative sends them home with you?
16. What will you do with gifts of food from friends, relatives, and business colleagues?
17. Using the information from all of the questions listed above, what are some workable and realistic strategies to help you eat your way through holiday and special events without gaining weight or feeling guilty? Your strategies needn't be

detailed -- unless you want them to be; a declaration of intent with some steps to get there, even if it's written on a napkin, is fine if it will work for you.

18. What's your back-up plan – in case you do overindulge? How do you stop the backsliding – how do you nip the mindless eating in the bud?

ACTION: Make an informed choice -- being informed doesn't deprive you of deliciousness, but does arm you with an element of control. If you know the calorie count of certain foods, you can make a good, better, or best choice.

Despite your planning, if you find yourself wavering in the face of an incredible buffet, pecan pie, Christmas cookies, happy hour drinks and snacks, leftover stuffing, buffalo wings, or your kid's trick or treat bag, ask yourself:

- Do I really want to eat that?
- Do I really, really want it or do I want it because it looks good, smells good, and means Christmas (or Halloween, or Thanksgiving, or Hanukkah, or Valentine's Day), or I earned it because I'm on vacation and I work hard all year long?
- Is it worth the calories?
- Do I need all of it (or any of it) to be happy or satisfied?
- How will I feel after I eat it – both physically and emotionally?

- What's more important to me: the food, how I feel while I'm eating it, how I feel after I eat it, and/or what the scale might say to me tomorrow morning?

If you ate too much and don't feel so great . . .

Get over it, ditch the guilt. It's one day (maybe a couple). Just don't let it go on and on and on some more. You can jettison that blip on the scale over the next week or so by any combination of moderately decreasing your daily calories and moderately increasing your daily exercise.

What you don't want to do is give in to the common pitfall: giving up until after the holidays, or vacation, or the entire summer because you made a few bad choices. **Overeating once or twice isn't what causes weight gain; consistently eating too much is the culprit.**

If you ate and drank the equivalent of around an extra 3500 calories (that's on top of what your body needs), you'd gain approximately one pound. Over the next week if you decreased your food and increased your exercise for the equivalent of a 500 calories a day deficit —or 250 fewer calories a day over two weeks, you'd lose that pound and your jeans, your bathing suit, and your scale will all be singing your praises.

Design Your Own Personal Eating foodMAP

- a. **Look through your answers** to the two sets of questions shown above.

- b. **What jumps out at you** about your preferences for what, where, when, and how you eat?

- c. If you're concerned about some of your eating behaviors, **choose 2 or 3 behaviors you would like to modify** and list them here:

- d. Answer this question: **what is your overall goal for holiday eating** -- is it to enjoy a little bit of everything without gaining weight; to splurge on Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve and be careful about what you eat the rest of the time; to eat Halloween candy with no restrictions on Halloween and then toss out the remaining candy the next day; or something else? To eat with abandon on vacation and then be Spartan in your choices for the same number of days when you return home

- e. Write down your overall plan -- be honest with yourself, and realistic, too:

- f. **What are 2 or 3 actions you're going to take to achieve your plan?** Be sensible and real. If you set unrealistic expectations you, most likely, will not be able to get the results you want and will get very frustrated in the process.



Penny Klatell, PhD, RN is a doctoral level nurse, a health, life, and nutrition coach and a Mom. She's also a food lover, former college professor, author, blogger, speaker, and a very frequent restaurant visitor.

Penny grew up in the restaurant business. Her parents had an old fashioned New York City luncheonette – the kind with a long counter and booths in the back.

She saw the beginning of the food chain, too. Her grandmother lived on a working farm in Pennsylvania where all meals were made from scratch and where she spent much vacation time feeding chickens and picking vegetables in her Grandma's very large garden.

Penny raised three very active, athletic, and hungry sons who taught her the meaning of having healthy and good tasting food available at all times. Her family was – and is -- a true proving ground for how to eat well . . .anytime, anywhere, and at any age.

Penny invites you to connect with her on her blog:

<http://EatOutEatWell.com>

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