

Ask a Specialist: Do You Have Tips for Healthier Holiday Baking?

Answer by: Kathy Riggs, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences professor, Iron County



Tasty aromas coming from the oven are very much a part of holiday traditions. Maybe it's a special pie or quick bread, or perhaps cookies or muffins. Whatever it is, most folks plan on gaining a pound or two over the holidays because of these

special foods. Though it's difficult not to indulge, it's possible to cut back on calories when baking holiday favorites. Consider these tips that will have little, if any, effect on flavor or texture.

* Use ingredient exchanges to lower fat content. Fruit puree, such as unsweetened applesauce or plain yogurt, can replace up to half the fat (shortening or butter) in a baked item. Instead of using frosting for cookies, brownies or cakes, substitute a sprinkling (using a sifter) of powdered/confectioner's sugar over the top instead. This significantly cuts fat and extra calories.

* Increase whole grains in recipes. Admittedly, getting used to whole wheat flour in recipes can take time, not only because of the difference in flavor but also because the weight of the final product can be heavier and harder to digest. It is worth making the change to whole wheat and other grains that add fiber to recipes because of the health benefits. Start by replacing half the flour in a recipe. Another option is to use hard white wheat flour so color isn't the first clue that something is different in the product.

* Reduce salt. Some baked goods can be very high in sodium. If a recipe calls for a teaspoon of salt, try using a scant teaspoon instead. Then, next time, reduce it even more to one-half teaspoon per recipe. We can condition our taste buds to be more sensitive to the taste of salt so that we can eventually use much less not only in baking but at the dinner table as well.

* Watch portion sizes. When preparing holiday foods to share with family and friends, consider offering smaller portions. Make cookies a bit smaller or offer only a few pieces of an item instead of an entire plate. Also consider using smaller dinner plates so that portion sizes are automatically reduced as people try to squeeze a little of everything onto the plate.

* Reduce sugar. While candy making depends on correct amounts of sugar and other ingredients to turn out properly, there is some freedom in exchanging and reducing amounts of sugar in baking. By using one-fourth cup less sugar per each cup in a recipe, the carbohydrates and calories are reduced. If you are tempted to substitute white granulated sugar with a more “healthy” sweetener such as honey, agave nectar or maple syrup, note that these sweeteners still add carbohydrates to the recipe although they are easier to digest and are more natural.

* Indulging in foods that are high in fat, sugar, sodium and refined flour for a few days is not an act of diet treason. Those with dietary diseases such as diabetes do, however, need to be mindful of their limitations. Otherwise, enjoy the holidays and try to remain active to burn off extra calories. Make it a goal to implement one or more of the above tips this month, and try to avoid overeating meal after meal the entire month. Overall, be smart, be in control and be sensible when it comes to baking and eating this holiday season.



Kathleen Riggs is the Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences professor for Iron County. She loves yard/garden work, where her favorite tasks are weeding and mowing the lawn. Her favorite appliance is the microwave oven, and her specialty is microwave caramels. She loves family time and occasions that bring everyone together from near or far.