FAT-PROOF your festive season

Eat smart this festive season and you won’t have any reason to sweat over your summer shape, says Bonnie Cleaver.

It’s that time of year again when festive functions and the end-of-year rush make it harder to get to the gym and the abundance of delicious food at family gatherings threatens to derail your healthy eating habits. Follow these smart strategies from the experts to avoid holiday weight gain.
1 HAVE AN ACTION PLAN

Heading into the festive season armed with willpower alone? You’re more likely to eat well if you’re well prepared. A study in Behaviour Research and Therapy found dieters who used avoidance strategies around food were more likely to overeat than those who had coping skills.

Laura Sutherland, spokesperson for the Dietitians Association of Australia, recommends creating an action plan for each festive event, including how you’ll deal with potential pitfalls. For example, if you’re attending a Christmas barbecue where the alcohol will be flowing, pack some light beer. Or if you’re heading to a cocktail party, plan to select four canapés when you arrive and make them last. “After each event, ask yourself if you came across other barriers, so that you can tweak your plan for future events,” says Sutherland.

2 STICK TO REGULAR MEALS

If you’re going to a decadent dinner party it can be tempting to skip lunch, but maintaining regular meals is key to keeping your appetite in check. “Going long periods without eating means you’ll end up hungry and are prone to overeating,” says Sutherland. “Instead, start the day off with a satisfying breakfast, such as wholegrain bread with baked beans or egg then, if you’re going to a dinner party, have a light lunch like a salmon salad or an omelette with vegetables.”

Having a pre-party snack can also help. “A lot of parties don’t have vegetables, so having a bowl of salad or vegetables before you go will make sure you’re getting that healthy component, and take the edge off your appetite,” says dietician and exercise physiologist Joanne Turner.

3 SEPARATE FOOD FROM FEELINGS

Not only does the celebratory nature of Christmas encourage carefree eating, it’s also a time when stress levels peak from the pressures of catering, last-minute shopping and difficult relatives, prompting comfort eating.

“Find a way to deal with stress that doesn’t involve food,” advises Dr Eva Kemps, senior lecturer in psychology at Flinders University. “It could be watching a comedy, reading a book or exercising to release endorphins.”

Research from the University of Delaware found people who are in a positive mood tend to choose healthier foods, so stay optimistic by scheduling daily time-out sessions and being selective about the events you attend.

4 MAKE SMART FOOD CHOICES

The average traditional Christmas dinner clocks in at approximately 12,500kJ — well above the 6000kJ to 8000kJ that’s recommended per day on most weight-loss plans. There’s no harm in enjoying your favourite treats, but summer is an ideal time to swap stodgy foods for fresh, low-fat options.

“At parties, avoid foods that are fried or pastry-covered and go for the sushi, fruit platter, vegetable sticks, wraps and grilled skewers,” advises Sutherland. “If you’re catering, keep meals light by serving salads, grilled vegetables, lean meat and seafood, ensuring there’s a balance on your plate of a quarter protein, a quarter carbohydrates and half vegetables or salad.”

Tropical fruit salads are always popular for dessert, as are compotes with low-fat yoghurt.

5 TAP INTO HUNGER CUES

Learning to tune into your body’s hunger signals means you’ll be better able to judge if you really need that fourth party pie. “Before you reach for something, ask yourself, ‘Why am I about to eat this? Am I actually hungry or am I just eating it because it’s there?’” says Kemps. If you’re not hungry, distance yourself from the food, strike up a conversation or keep your hands occupied by holding a drink. If you are hungry, start out with a small portion, take small bites and chew slowly. “That way, you’ll get more satisfied sensory perception from your food, and will be less likely to overeat,” says Kemps.

6 LIMIT YOUR LIQUID KILOJOULE INTAKE

They may not send your brain the same full signal as food, but alcoholic beverages are packed with kilojoules — at 27kJ per gram, alcohol has almost double the energy density of carbohydrates and protein. You don’t have to be a teetotaller, but do try and drink in moderation. “Have a glass of water before you go to parties so you’re not drinking alcohol to quench your thirst, know your limits and pace yourself by sipping slowly,” advises Turner.

AVOID: Liquors, sweet wines and sweet mixed drinks, creamy cocktails and sugary fruit punch, which are high in kilojoules.

TRY: Light wines and beers, Champagne or wine diluted with ice, soda water or fruit juice.

Alternate alcoholic drinks with water and enjoy more non-alcoholic drinks like lime and soda, iced tea or cranberry juice with mineral water.
BE CHOOSY
Just because there are six flavours of chips, three bowls of lollies and five desserts on offer at Christmas lunch doesn’t mean you have to try them all. “There are usually a few favourites that Christmas wouldn’t be the same without, such as your grandma’s pudding, but the rest you can do without,” says Turner. “Zone in on two or three of your favourites – there will be more than enough parties over the season that you can choose certain treats for one party and others the next time.”

WATCH OUT FOR EATING TRIGGERS
Food psychologists say external factors in our environment – from the size of our plates to the amount of people in the room – can prompt us to overeat without realising it. “The key is to be aware of these factors, plan ahead and put strategies in place to counter them,” says Dr Lenny Vartanian, lecturer in health psychology at The University of New South Wales.

TRIGGER: The variety of foods in the Christmas spread.
WHY? A range of colours, flavours and aromas excites the appetite.
DO THIS: Keep catering simple – guests won’t be disappointed if you have two types of cake for dessert instead of six.

TRIGGER: Your proximity to the food that’s on offer.
WHY? The more easily accessible food is, the greater the temptation can be to graze without realising how much you’ve actually eaten.
DO THIS: “Instead of keeping food on the dining table, leave it in the kitchen where you have to get up for more and are fully aware of what you’re doing,” says Vartanian.

TRIGGER: Restaurant-sized plates.
WHY? Large plates, bowls and cups trick the eye into thinking portions are smaller than they really are.
DO THIS: “Serve yourself on a smaller plate to start out with and then, if you’re still hungry afterwards, you can have a second helping,” says Kemps.

KEEP MOVING
Your usual gym workouts may fall by the wayside over Christmas, but try to do something active every day. “Get the family involved in a game of backyard cricket, have a swim at the beach or pool or kick a football around,” suggests Turner. Starting your day with a 20-minute power walk will kick-start your metabolism and motivate you to eat well during the day. Other stay-fit tips include:

- Signing up for a fun run or swim in the New Year, so you know you can’t let your fitness slide.
- Asking family members to forgo individual gifts to you in favour of a gym membership or personal training sessions.
- Planning your festive socialising around exercise, such as a game of tennis or a walk, rather than

GIVE FOOD-PUSHERS THE SHOVE
There’s one at every festive event – the well-meaning friend or relative who keeps topping up your plate. Depending on your relationship, there are different ways to deal with this, says Vartanian. “You may want to have a conversation with the person before the party, where you politely say, ‘I struggle with my weight so it can be hard for me when you offer food.’ In other cases, it’s about being polite, but persistent in your refusal, or even making a joke of it and saying, ‘You’d have to roll me out the door if I had any more.’” If it’s something the person has prepared themselves, cocoons a refusal in a positive statement, such as ‘That looks really delicious, but I’m so full’, suggests Vartanian.