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'TIS THE SEASON ... A FOOD FRENZY SURVIVAL GUIDE

Uh ohhhhh ... *they're baaaack* ... the holidays! How are you going to handle the gorgeous, fattening foods that inevitably accompany every party, gathering or event?

Food is a big and wonderful part of the holiday tradition. From Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve we stuff our faces with Aunt Mary's famous pumpkin pie to Grandma Sylvia's New York-style cheese cake. (Actually, it all starts with our kids' Halloween candy!) Learning to deal with the mass quantities of fattening food doesn't have to be painful. Instead, get to the root of the holiday munchies.

Take the Stress Away Stress causes many of us to overeat. This year, cut out a few of the more stressful holiday events. It is OK to say, "No." For instance, traveling during the holidays can cause extra stress that you don't need. Put your foot down this year, and tell your relatives that you're not going to travel

Or maybe your stress is caused by having a gazillion people over to your house for dinner. This year why not consider having a quiet dinner or suggest that it's someone else's turn to play host.

Spending too much on gifts can also be an unneeded stress. Try telling relatives you'd like to cut down on gift giving this year. Just tell the plain truth: Money is tight and you can't afford it. Instead, suggest a lower cost alternative, like trading homemade gifts or putting a limit on the gift cost or making a donation in their name(s) to a charity.

Whatever the source of your stress, nail it down and remove it ... and throw the guilt out the window. You will feel relieved and happy with the control that you exert over the situation. It's your choice to take the control. Don't leave room for excuses.

Focus on Holiday Activities, Not Holiday Food Go ice skating, window shop along Fifth Avenue, take a horse and buggy ride through Central Park or curl up in front of the fire place and begin reading that book you've meant to start for months. Don't be afraid to start your own traditions. Instead of focusing on the baking and cooking traditions, make a new tradition surrounding an activity like decorating your own door wreath.

Replace Some of Your High Calorie Holiday Foods With Low Calorie or Healthier Options Replace cookies with tea biscuits or low-fat muffins, rich candies with fruit, apple pie with ambrosia.

Put Limits on What You Allow Yourself to Eat What do you do when you just have to make the cookies or when a neighbor brings you a delicious fruit cake? Combat cookie munchies with a rule before you start baking: Allow yourself 1-2 cookies of each batch, and then give the rest away to family, friends and teachers. If you receive lots of baked goods as gifts, freeze them or bring them to work or serve them only when guests come over.

Going to a party?

- Don't starve all day to eat more at the party. You'll end up eating the high fat foods to compensate.

- Eat a healthy meal before the party. You'll be less likely to overeat once you get there.
- Need a dish to pass? Bring a healthy one ... a fruit tray, vegetable dish, or low fat vegetable lasagna.
- Carry your appetizers on a napkin, not a plate. You are more likely to fill up a plate, even if you aren't hungry. Stick with the napkin; you won't be able to carry as much food on it.
- Sometimes the problem with parties is the desserts are laid out with the main meal. Be sure to eat the healthy foods before diving into the desserts.
- Eat a variety of foods in smaller quantities.
- Need to munch? Hang out at the fruit and vegetable trays.
- Your choice of beverage can make or break your entire day ... your beverage of choice should be flavored seltzers or wine spritzers.

Adopt a new holiday philosophy this year that will change your life and your holiday eating habits: Take control, and give up or replace a few of the holiday traditions. Whether stress inducing events or grandma's cheese cake, ask yourself, "Do I really need it this year?" This will go a long way in keeping you healthy this holiday season. Remember, your overall health is determined by your long-term choices throughout the year. After all, once the menorah is packed away and the Christmas tree is at the curb, you don't want to be left with five or ten pounds of holiday memory.