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## 10 Healthy Holiday Traditions to Try This Year

### A Season Filled with Health and Happiness

Most families have holiday traditions, big and small — such as a certain dish for a special meal or an activity in which the whole family partakes. Unfortunately, not all of these traditions help create a healthy holiday for you and your family. From baking a plethora of cookies and pies to the stress of shopping for gifts, certain activities can adversely affect your health.

"Stress is inherent during the holidays, which can raise cortisol levels and stall fat loss," says J.J. Virgin, a certified fitness and nutrition expert, speaker, and life coach based in Rancho Mirage, California. "People adopt a 'let-it-all-go' attitude as they attend holiday parties, family gatherings, and buffets where food and drink flow. And then on January 1, we scramble to erase the damage we've done over the previous few months." But it doesn't have to be that way. Check out the following ways that you and your family can create healthy holiday traditions for years to come.



### 1. Plan a Fun Outdoor Holiday Activity

The cold weather causes many people to take their family holiday activities indoors, and that often means baking fattening cookies or plopping down on the couch to watch television. But Steve Siebold, a career training expert and author of 177 Mental Toughness Secrets of the World Class, says that outdoor activities aren't just for kids. This year, when the youngsters go out skiing, sledding, or ice skating, take a cue and join them. "Outdoor activities are a great alternative to sitting around the house because they include some form of exercise and, at the same time, encourage spending time with your loved ones," Siebold says.

### 2. Bake Healthier Treats

When your holiday traditions involve baking foods like cookies, cakes, or breads, simple swaps can turn cooking into a healthy holiday activity. "You can go online to find healthy holiday recipes for all types of dietary restrictions," says Cari Coulter, RD, director of Wellspring Wisconsin, a pediatric weight-loss program hosted at Carthage College in Kenosha. "Many of these recipes do an excellent job of replacing traditional holiday favorites. Taking some time to identify and

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### 3. Decky the Halls

There's no better way to blend good old-fashioned tradition with exercise than to get out the lights and ornaments and decorate the house with your family — you can burn up to 250 calories every hour of decking those halls, Coulter says. Just make sure to give kids safe jobs on the ground while you tackle the ladder work. "I love decorating the house — it can be fun and a great way for the family to spend time together," Virgin adds.

### 4. Play in the Snow

Bundling up to build a snowman is another tradition that shouldn't be reserved just for the kids. Not only is this holiday activity a good source of exercise, but it will get the whole family working together. "Building a snowman is fun and gives meaning to interaction, physical activity, collaboration, and overall personal and relational growth," says Francine Lederer, PsyD, a clinical psychologist in private practice in Los Angeles.

## 5. Get Healthy for Charity

Another great way to put the holiday in perspective and not get bogged down in the commercialism of the season is to spend time helping others. This can be a healthy activity like participating in a local 5k or another charity fun run, or helping those less fortunate by volunteering at a community dinner. "It's important for people and families to establish meaning in their own holiday celebrations as opposed to getting stuck on the material aspect," Lederer says. "This helps families re-establish 'tradition' from the standpoint of quality time put in relationships and how that time is spent."

## 6. Go Caroling

You're outside, you're walking, you're singing, and having fun — when it comes to healthy holiday family traditions, Virgin says it's tough to beat good, old-fashioned caroling. And this holiday activity is sure to raise others' holiday spirits as well. "I'm a fan of anything that gets people away from being so food-focused during the holidays," she says. "Anything where you're moving, you're outdoors, and you're enjoying each other's company is good."

## 7. Make Nighttime Story Time

If family is the focus during the holidays, then zoning out in front of the TV isn't much of a bonding activity. Try switching it off for a few nights and reading aloud some Christmas or Hannukah stories instead. "This is a great tradition to have, especially with smaller children," says Erika Bliss, MD, a family physician and president and CEO of Qliance in Washington. Besides being a healthy holiday activity, it's likely to become a great family tradition. "Kids will remember this for the rest of their lives and will be more likely to pass this tradition down to their own children," Dr. Bliss says.

## 8. Take Your Time with Dinner

Big dinners are a staple of family holiday traditions, so why not make the most of them by having a meaningful conversation at the dinner table? You can tell stories, talk about important events, or simply go around the table and say what you're thankful for. Prolonging the meal can make for healthy holiday eating too, as eating more slowly means you'll typically eat less. "I'm a big fan of slowing down in general," Virgin says. "We eat too quickly, and it can lead to indigestion, weight gain, and other health problems." Slow down and you'll be calmer and digest your food better, she says.

## 9. Make Family Holiday Meals Healthier

Keep traditional foods on the menu, but make them in a healthy way. "Replacing foods and ingredients with low-fat or fat-free counterparts is a great way to reduce the fat and calorie content of your meal without feeling deprived, because you don't necessarily need to give something up," Coulter says. "For example, use reduced-fat instead of regular sour cream on your baked potato or in your veggie dip, pureed vegetables or fat-free evaporated milk to thicken a soup, or pureed pumpkin or applesauce in your baked goods instead of butter."

## 10. Get Up and Move After Dinner

Rather than settling into the couch with a hot toddy or a glass of eggnog, create a healthy holiday tradition by heading outside for a walk, a game of football, or another activity that your family chooses. "I love doing this on holidays," Virgin says. "Otherwise you're more likely to head back into the kitchen for seconds and thirds."

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