

'Tis the Season: Entertaining Made Easier

Americans love entertaining at home, with eight guests attending the average holiday party, and nearly 70 percent of hosts preparing food for their guests. Those who said they don't enjoy entertaining say it is too time consuming (35 percent), too expensive (24 percent) or too stressful (22 percent). (Dinner Plate Digest Survey, 2005)

In 69 percent of U.S. households, family members pitch in and cook different parts of the holiday dinner, cutting the amount of time the host has to spend in the kitchen. (Parade Survey, 2005)

The American Psychological Association reports 49 percent of women in the United States experience heightened stress during the holidays due to planning parties, extra cooking and shopping for gifts. Research shows stress, and the unhealthy behaviors people use to manage stress, contribute to health problems such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

When it comes to food, Americans want it "tastier, easier and quicker" according to "What America Eats" a survey of the nation's food and eating patterns. Ten years ago, Americans spent an average of 49 minutes preparing dinner. Now, the average time spent is 31 minutes thanks to new time saving products.

Researchers from UCLA found a person takes the same amount of time -- 26-93 minutes -- to prepare simple, healthful meals using scratch ingredients as meals using prepackaged convenience foods. The key difference is the higher nutritional value of the scratch meal, which had less fat, sodium and preservatives and more vitamins and minerals.

In a survey conducted by *Food and Wine Magazine*, Thanksgiving turkey was voted America's favorite holiday food with 52 percent of the vote. Cheese came in second behind chocolate as the food Americans can't live without, which is good news since Cheddar and Swiss cheeses have been shown to reduce the risk for tooth decay, a disease recently described by the U.S. Surgeon General as a "silent epidemic."

The American Council of Exercise estimates that the traditional holiday feast of turkey and all the trimmings contains more than 3,000 calories and more than 225 grams of fat. This means the average person may consume enough fat at the holiday meal to equal 1 ¼ cup of shortening. (Calorie Control Council, 2006)

According to a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, surprisingly Americans only gain about one pound during the winter holiday season. However, for the 64 percent of the population that is overweight or obese, the weight gain is five pounds or more between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day.

For a heart healthy holiday regimen, the American Heart Association recommends reducing saturated fat in recipes and 30 minutes or more of exercise most days of the week to prevent holiday weight gain.

The 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines suggest most Americans consume too many foods that are high in calories, but low in nutrients. The Naturally Nutrient Rich Coalition encourages eating more foods from all five groups -- whole grains, fruits, vegetables, low fat dairy and lean meats -- to provide vitamins and minerals such as A, C, zinc, calcium, iron, potassium, B vitamins and protein, which are essential for healthy growth and preventing chronic disease.