

How dietitians handle the holiday season

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South Africa's long summer holiday brings welcome relief after the hardworking, high-pressure year as well as well-deserved opportunities to fully enjoy festive traditions and indulgences. You want to make the most of the special times but also find the balance with your healthy lifestyle goals and habits.



Here's how four South Africa Registered Dietitians and spokespeople for [ADSA](#) (Association for Dietetics in South Africa) are going to approach personal and family well-being over the holiday season.

Dietitian, Zama Khumalo from Howick, KZN puts 'silly season' into perspective:

One of the key aspects of achieving your healthy lifestyle goals is listening to your body – especially when it comes to cravings that all too often are the bane of healthy lifestyles. During the summer holidays, we can experience a lot of cravings. For instance, it's hot, and you just want to cool down with a nice, cold and often sugary beverage. One of my favourite things about the South African summer holidays is the opportunity to explore how to incorporate cravings into the ways I manage my healthy lifestyle.

The challenge: lots of braais and desserts!

There's a parade of parties and end-of-year functions, family get-togethers and braais with friends. It's a social whirl centred around food and drinks, raising challenges when it comes to health and nutrition. I personally try to listen to my body. I avoid depriving myself of the treats I may crave at that family braai - everything is allowed in moderation! So, a small slice of my aunt's famous custard pudding is allowed. The great thing about the holiday food spread is that there are generally lots of salads or light vegetable side dishes, so I take advantage of this and pack my plate with more vegetables and salads and pick the leaner pieces of meat. This way I get to enjoy the festive meal but stay aligned to my healthy lifestyle. Because of the great weather, it's easy to focus on physical activity as well – even on vacation away from home, you can have a daily swim, walk along the beach promenade or play an active game in the park with family or friends.

ADSA spokesperson, Kelly Scholtz on feeding the family over the holiday

The summer school holiday means that the routine isn't the same, which is fabulous, but many parents will still be working while their children are already on holiday. I have a handful of anchor habits that I keep track of, to ensure I am staying focused on wellness and that keep me feeling in control of my health when I'm busy. For example, I aim to drink two litres of water or herbal tea and to consume 500g of vegetables and fruits every day. I aim to make time for my own yoga practice, or at the very least five minutes of stretching at the end of the day. I use a simple meditation and breathing practice daily to keep my mind calm and focused, and I aim to take at least one walk in nature every week. Our bodies need habits like these to stay healthy. So, during the changes that the holiday brings to our routines, define a few anchor habits, and keep track of these.

My healthy eating hacks for the holidays

For me, holiday time means a little more time than I usually have to plan meals and cook a variety of foods; more time outdoors and more time for exercise to balance out the indulgences! So, providing balanced family nutrition can feel easier. My main nutrition challenges are around making time to buy and prepare healthy food that we all like every day, and that doesn't cost a fortune. I tend to prepare quite simple meals during the week that I know will work for children and adults, with a focus on health and nutrition. I have a rotation of dishes like roast chicken and veg, spaghetti bolognese with lots of grated vegetables, a mild chicken or vegetarian curry, macaroni cheese with wholewheat pasta and pureed cauliflower, wraps with chicken or mince and salad, stir fry with noodles or fried rice, lots of vegetables and any lean protein. If I run out of time or ideas, then a quick veggie omelette or frittata works well. When it comes to the festive season, we continue to eat lots of vegetables, fruit, salads and other healthy food, but we might add in a few more indulgent foods when we are entertaining.

Anchor habits help, and enjoying the festivities is essential

Holidays come and go and represent a very small percentage of the year. The festive season is a time to celebrate and socialise with friends and family. A good relationship with food includes being able to take part in festivities, so I would encourage you to enjoy your holidays and, where you can, try to include healthy options and enough water so that your body is still nourished and hydrated while you are having fun.

ADSA spokesperson and Registered Dietitian, Nelile Nxumalo keeps it simple

The main healthy lifestyle challenge over the holidays is trying to keep myself and family on track when it comes to maintaining healthy food choices. Typically, we live a very simple lifestyle. I particularly enjoy weekend braais and lunches with family and friends. I prepare awesome curries and Sunday seven-colour meals are my speciality. However, during the holiday, we always have huge family gatherings, so there's a greater amount and variety of food options available which can make it tricky to keep focused on healthy eating.

I have a few strategies that help keep things on track:

- Firstly, I try not to attend events and parties on an empty stomach. When you're hungry you run the risk of overeating or choosing the higher calorie food options.
- Salads and vegetables always fill up half my plate, and this is an easy way to limit your portions of foods with high refined starch content.
- I stock up on healthy snacks in the house, such as fruits, nuts, popcorn and try to avoid keeping lots of sweets and cookies.
- I encourage my family to keep hydrated by drinking plenty of water and avoiding high calorie beverages and drinks.
- I do not stop exercising just because it is the holidays. There are always ways to keep active without being at the gym, such as taking walks, hiking and swimming.

It's important to remember the holidays are only four to five weeks long and you can keep focused on maintaining your healthy lifestyle habits. Yes, of course, you can indulge on certain days, but you will feel great if you combine enjoying the

holiday celebrations with healthy eating and sticking to your lifestyle habits as much as possible.

Nathalie Mat's tips for healthy eating while travelling with children on holiday

I love the summer holidays as they give us more freedom to be active and we have more time to make food together. I love getting the kids involved in cooking meals as this improves their exposure to different foods and it's a great time to model a healthy relationship with food. I do buy celebration foods over the season, but we don't buy endless supplies of them. Food is seasonal and should be enjoyed but we don't need to overconsume them while they're around.

Be prepared for taking kids on the road

If we're driving to our holiday destination, we enjoy packing a car 'picnic', basically a range of finger foods that the family enjoys. Some of the foods will be things that we eat regularly like our favourite crunchy veggies, hummus and pretzels or popcorn but there will also be some convenience options like ready-made meat balls or marinated chicken fillets. Having some food in the car means that we can be more flexible about when we stop for toilet breaks and whether we want to stop to eat.

Take a kind approach to holiday eating

I think the most important thing to keep in mind is being reasonable and kind to the whole family. At the end of a long year, we all want to relax. Making poor food choices day in and out is likely to make us feel uncomfortable but micromanaging our diets while on holiday is unnecessary and unpleasant for all involved. Aim to make nutritious choices most of the time and make space for the fun stuff too. We don't just eat for nutrients; we eat for enjoyment and as part of celebration. Cooking and eating together can form lifelong memories and it's important that we let enjoyment be part of our nutrition decisions too.

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