



## Stress-Busting Nibble n' Nosh Tips for Caregivers this Holiday Season

By Alicia Schwartz, RN at VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans

**HEALTH-** Two words that the holidays bring to mind for many of us these days are food and stress. With no shortage of sugary, fattening foods and a seemingly never-ending to-do list, it is easy for people with busy lives, particularly family caregivers who often lack time to care for themselves, to resort to unhealthy food habits like stress-eating during the holidays.

Does this picture sound familiar: the holiday is right around the corner, you've been tending to your elderly parents all day, traveling to appointments, doing housework, and running errands while squeezing in that last minute holiday shopping, decorating, gift wrapping, cooking, and travel plan coordination. When you finally stop to catch your breath, you realize you never ate lunch and are about to miss dinner. You're tired, frustrated, and of course, hungry, and your to-do list is not disappearing any time soon, even if your energy is. For fuel, you:

- Reach for the stash of nuts on the table, and resolve to buy yourself a rotisserie chicken at the grocery store for dinner. You deserve it after the long day you've had.
- Have a candy bar and a cup of coffee for now to hold you over until you have the chance to go to a fast food drive-thru later tonight.
- Raid the pantry and dig into the seasonal snacks on hand – sugar-coated pecans, peppermint bark, caramel corn – and wash them down with a sugary, caffeinated beverage for energy.



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If this sounds like you, then read on. Many of the family caregivers I know through my work as a registered nurse caring for frail, elderly New Yorkers with multiple chronic illnesses are heading in the same direction. Gobbling holiday candy at the office or having that extra serving of pumpkin pie or holiday cookies may seem like a quick sustenance fix or a boost of cheer, but extra caffeine, sugary or high-fat snacks, and processed foods can lead to a “nutritional hangover” that is harmful to both the body and mind. Here are three simple reminders that I reinforce with my patients and their family caregivers during the holidays:

### Minimize Coffee and Other Caffeine Intake

Your morning cup of joe is great for the boost of energy you need to check off your to-do list, but too much caffeine can increase anxiety and disrupt sleep. Rather than making a second cup or buying a holiday-flavored latte, switch to green tea, a powerful antioxidant with less than half the amount of caffeine as coffee and only drink de-cafeinated beverages in the afternoon and evening. A delicious way to wean yourself off coffee is having a nibble of dark chocolate now and again – it's also packed with antioxidants and in small amounts, can help lower blood pressure, improve blood flow and cognitive function, and reduce risk of stroke.

### **Snack on Natural Sugars**

Those Christmas cookies sure are tasty and festive, but they're packed with empty calories that provide no vitamins, minerals, or important nutrients. For so many of our older population, diabetes is a serious concern as well. Yael Reich, RN, Certified Diabetes Educator with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, cautions that extreme blood sugar fluctuations, often brought on by sugar binges and crashes, can create serious health problems for people with diabetes. They can also cause mood swings and zap energy levels for anyone—especially during stressful or busy times of the year. A holiday trail mix made with dark chocolate and fresh fruits like blueberries and blackberries is a delicious, suitable alternative, and the fruits are packed with fibers that help prevent blood sugar spikes. An apple with peanut butter is also a quick and healthy go-to snack!

### **Scrap Processed Foods as Much as Possible**

Your holiday dinner doesn't need to come in a can. Processed foods may seem harmless, but they contain artery-clogging trans fats and saturated fats as well as copious amounts of salt and sugar. Snack on whole foods – foods that are closest to their natural form – and incorporate them into meals when possible. Whole grains, nuts, legumes, vegetables, fruits, and proteins rich in omega-3s such as fish are great staples to a stress-busting diet!

The holidays can bring people together in wonderful and self-affirming ways, and for many of our elderly loved ones, they are an important and welcome chance to connect with friends and family. Remembering to nibble and nosh mindfully can help ensure that you and your family will gather in good health for many holidays to come.

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