TuSalud

Healthier Holiday Treats

Simple, fast, guilt-free ways to enjoy scrumptious desserts this holiday season.

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What are some basic ingredients you've used to make really simple, healthy, portion-controlled desserts for the holidays?

Phyllis Lerner, healthy foods advocatePhoto courtesy of Phyllis Lerner

I’m a great believer in preplanning for special events, and I write about this all the time on my website, followPhyllis.com. This means that before the holidays, I usually drop a few pounds by simply cutting out a little each day, which allows me to indulge in some holiday delights. With that being said, I know from my followers that this is not always easy, so I have developed a game plan that allows for some healthier dessert options.

Although fruit contains sugar, using it as a main ingredient helps decrease calories and increase nutrition. Apples and pears are great at holiday time and can simply be baked with some spices

and a little butter for a yummy treat. Top them with toasted, chopped natural nuts (no oil, salt or sugar added) and then finish with a dollop of whipped cream. Since a single fruit is already portion controlled, it makes reaching for seconds a little awkward.

What's the fastest dessert you've ever made?

The fastest dessert I make is my Bananas Delicious! The recipe requires you just to slice up half a slightly green banana and toss a few little things on top. Since this dessert is basically a small amount of fruit with healthy nuts and a smidge of toppings, it's low in calories and rich in nutrients. This food video is super popular on followPhyllis.com because it's so unbelievably yummy!

What kind of single-serving desserts are good for folks who don't want to pack on the pounds?

Small glasses are great for those watching their weight! Not only do these containers hold just a little bit of deliciousness, but being able to see your treat really gets your taste buds excited! I think the best type of dessert to serve in a small glass is a layered indulgence, like a parfait. Many healthy ingredients lend themselves to this type of dessert.

Some ingredients to use for layering are nonfat flavored Greek yogurt, macerated berries (sprinkle with sugar and allow to sit for a few minutes until they yield their juice), sugar-free puddings, bananas, chopped nuts, sautéed fruit (apples and pears are great) finely crushed cookies and mini chocolate chips. If you wanted to try this method to "duplicate" a chocolate cream pie, you could layer sugar-free chocolate pudding with a squirt of whipped cream and a few mini chips between the layers and then top with a little cream and a sprinkling of shaved chocolate. You can also put a small cookie, such as a vanilla wafer, at the bottom of the glass as a "crust."

I've made my Sundae in a Cup (another followPhyllis food video favorite) in martini glasses for guests because they are composed of just whipped cream, a few maraschino cherries, nuts and a drizzle of syrup. And you can always cut a traditional pie into slivers and place point down into a glass with a thin layer of whipped cream at the bottom. In addition, you can cut cakes or brownies into small squares and place a couple in a small, clear glass with a garnish. This way you are eating the real thing—just in a very reduced size. Yum!

What ingredients do you use to make traditional holiday desserts, such as cakes and pies, that can help cut calories, fat and sugar from these dishes while ensuring they'll still be delicious?

Often, when we try to duplicate a calorie-laden dessert, the end product doesn't taste that great and the actual calorie savings can be quite small. Because of this, I advocate having a very small taste of a couple of real goodies to end your meal. Still, I realize that for some people this is unrealistic.

When preparing more healthful holiday treats, the first thing you will want to reduce is the fat. The basic rule of thumb is to replace no more than half the fat with a substitute to ensure good taste

and texture. My favorite substitutes for fat in a recipe are unsweetened applesauce, mashed bananas, canned pumpkin puree or pureed prunes. Choose the substitute that works best for the taste of the baked product. (Prunes actually work great in chocolate recipes!)

Replacing sugar is a little more problematic for the home cook. Most artificial, non-caloric sugar substitutes, such as aspartame, don't give the finished product the correct taste or texture, especially in cakes. Other sweeteners, such as maple syrup, honey and agave nectar, are processed well in the body but don't really save calories. Additionally, you can use fruit to replace some of the sugar. Mashed bananas and pureed dates work well, but they do contain sugar, so don't overdo it. But if you absolutely must substitute the sugar, I suggest using stevia because I think this plant-based sweetener tastes the best of all the true sugar substitutes.

It's crucial when replacing ingredients that you work from a recipe because the quantity of the substitute may not equal the quantity of the real ingredient. If making your desserts healthier is the primary goal, it's wise to replace some of the white flour with better alternatives such as oat, almond, whole wheat or coconut flours. The takeaway is that trying to duplicate traditional holiday desserts using healthier ingredients is doable but not necessarily a calorie saver.

This is my advice: Instead of making very fattening holiday treats like pecan pie, why not make something tasty and low-calorie? Last year, for Thanksgiving I made stuffed baked apples that were a huge hit! I simply cored large apples and filled the centers with chopped walnuts, raisins, cinnamon, a touch of nutmeg and a small pat of butter. I baked them in the oven until soft and served them with some freshly whipped cream. My house smelled amazing, and my guests were thrilled!

This holiday season, I'm going to try making an avocado mousse, as this seems like the healthy dessert of the moment. Always try to think outside the box!

Phyllis Lerner, is the founder of followphyllis.com. She's a fitness advocate who is dedicated to empowering women and inspiring them to become the healthiest and happiest they can be. Her website particularly focuses on middle-aged women who have experienced difficulty losing and maintaining weight. She says that her nutrition plans are based off whatever yields results and remains feasible to the women 50 years and older that the fitness industry often forgets about.

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