

Holiday Eating Tips

by Jennifer Hutchison, RD, CSSD, LD

Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics

Originally posted to Ironman.com 12/14/2005

Here we are in the thick of the holiday season, which just so happens to coincide with many triathletes' "off season." This is the time of the year when you can have less structure to your weekly schedule, more time to enjoy your family and friends, and actually do some of the things you put on hold thanks to all that Ironman training. The main problem with the fusion of "off season" meeting the holiday season is unwanted weight gain. Think about it ...less frequency, duration and intensity of activity coupled with more stress related to holiday travel or preparations. Combine this with more opportunity to eat, not to mention all the seasonal treats that pop up this time of year, and you may find yourself struggling to squeeze back into those bike shorts come January.

To avoid entering the New Year with a little too much "junk in the trunk" consider the following tips for eating during the "off season":

General tips for the "Off Season":

Hide the sports nutrition products

Actually this should have been done immediately following your last race of the season. Give yourself a break from these training staples. Save the sports drinks, bars and gels for the latter part of your general preparation cycle training ... the off season is a time to focus on using REAL food to fuel your body.

Try new foods

This is the best time of the year to get out of your eating rut and explore different foods. Spend more time in the produce section; look for colorful fruits and vegetables. Consider trying spaghetti squash, red or orange peppers, avocado or a new salad blend. Your goal is to try something new or something you have not had in a while. Make it a point to add a new food item to your grocery cart each supermarket visit. Your choice should be wholesome with minimal processing.... so no, the "New and Improved" Chips Ahoy cookies do not count ☺

Clean out and shuffle the pantry

Get rid of any outdated food products, sports nutrition items or dietary supplements. Rotate healthier food items to the front. This would be a great time to try the Tabouli salad mix or use those dried beans to *finally* make that homemade chili or bean soup!

Cut back on food portions

Common sense should tell you less activity means less food should be consumed. However after months of eating large quantities of food to support your Ironman training, this can be a tough adjustment to make. Portion control is key for weight management. A practical reference for your own food portions is your hand. Basically, the lean protein portion of your plate should be about the size and thickness of the diameter of your palm. The starch, fruit or carbohydrate portion of your meal should be no more than the size of your fist. The bulk of your plate should be vegetables as they are low in calories, very filling and full of nutrients to help keep you healthy all year long.

Stay hydrated

This sounds simple enough but some times athletes get out of the habit of drinking enough fluids during the cooler months and when they are not regularly training. Focus on drinking water (or other calorie free beverages) and eat plenty of fruits and vegetables to keep the body hydrated. If you're visiting the restroom every few hours and your urine is pale yellow to near colorless...hydration wise, you are good to go.

Here are a few other tips to allow you to enjoy the holiday festivities without weight gain:

Limit alcohol and other calorie-containing beverages

There is nothing wrong with a mug of beer, glass of wine or even the occasional sour apple martini (one of my personal favorites), but recognize these beverages can pack a huge calorie punch. Limit intake of high calorie beverages to one time per week and a one- to two-drink maximum.

The approximate calorie content of commonly consumed holiday beverages are as follows:

12 oz Light beer	90 calories
12 oz Regular beer	160 calories
4 oz Wine	80 -90 calories
3 oz Martini	175 calories
8 oz Egg Nog	350 calories
12 oz Regular soda	150 calories

Enjoy the party not the food

Holiday gatherings are social functions that are notorious for uncontrolled nibbling. The best way to curb your intake this time of year is to have a light but healthy dinner before you go. If you do like to nibble while being social, stick with vegetable and fruit trays or a deli platter. Another option to eliminate nibbling (and one of my favorite tricks) is to have a tin of powerful breath mints handy. Pop one of those little guys in your mouth and your taste buds will be overwhelmed ... nothing will taste very good after that. Another bonus to this method is fresh breath so everyone will enjoy talking to you!

Get rid of leftovers

If you host a holiday gathering and serve traditional but less than healthy food ... get rid of the leftovers. If it's not there you cannot eat it, right? Package it up and insist your guests take it home. If your guest list includes health conscious athletes like yourself and they decline your generous offer then just throw the stuff away. However, if you cannot bare the thought of chucking the cheesecake then at least wrap it up and place it in the freezer to enjoy at a later date. Think of how good that may taste after an early season long ride.

Gaining control over your food choices during this time of the year can set the stage for positive eating habits. What a great way to enter a new training year ... healthy, rejuvenated and without any of the "junk".

Jennifer Hutchison, RD, CSSD, LD
Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics
USAT Certified Level 2 Coach
USAT Regional Athlete Development Coordinator - Florida