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The Secret to Surviving the Holiday Buffet

by *Brian Wansink*

(MSNBC) There is probably no greater diet danger zone than the holiday buffet. It's hard to resist grabbing a huge plate and piling it up with buttery breads, cheeses, meats, cakes, cookies and pies.



Although it might seem as if we're swimming against stream when it comes to the delicious — but calorie-laden — holiday table, there are a lot of people who seem immune to overloading their plates. They have fun at buffets, parties and dinners without gaining weight. What's their secret?

To better understand how some people survive the pitfalls of all-you-can-eat dining, researchers at my Cornell University Food and Brand Lab observed 213 normal weight and overweight diners at buffets across the country. We found that heavier diners are more likely than slimmer diners to sit closer to the buffet, use larger plates and serve themselves immediately instead of browsing the buffet.

In the study, heavy folks grabbed a plate almost as soon as they arrived and immediately started serving themselves. The normal weight diners were more likely to scout things out first. When they did pick up a plate they were seven times more likely than the heavy eaters to take the smallest plate available. Some specifics:

- 71 percent of normal-weight diners browsed the buffet before serving themselves, compared to 33 percent of obese diners.
- 27 percent of normal-weight patrons faced the buffet compared to 42 percent of obese diners.
- 16 percent of obese diners sat at a booth rather than a table compared to 38 percent of normal weight diners.
- Normal-weight people chewed their food an average of 15 times per bite versus overweight people who chewed only 12 times. In fact, speedy eaters are three times more likely to be overweight than people who eat more slowly and who don't eat until they're full, recent research found.
- Overweight diners sat an average of 16 feet closer to the buffet than normal-weight diners, presumably to shorten the trip when they go back for seconds ... or thirds.

Have your cake and eat it

There are three main problems with a buffet, not only at the holidays, but anytime of the year. Those huge tables of food are prime examples of what I call the 3 C's of disastrous dieting:

Convenience: Food is all around and it's often within arm-reach.

Caloric: Whether sweet or salty, buffet foods are often higher in the indulgence factor than good sense.

Choices: There is a lot of variety, which increases how much you eat because your taste buds don't burn out on one thing.

The bottom line of the buffet is you really can have your holiday cake and eat it, too. You just need to browse the food to find what you really want, use a small plate and eat slowly. To avoid the temptation of going back for seconds, sit as far away from the table of food as possible. If you don't face the goodies, you are less likely to spot something else you want to pile on the plate.

In my book, "Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think," I also describe a trick that seems to work well for many holiday buffet-goers. It's called the Rule of Two. You can choose anything you want at the buffet, but you can never have more than two items on your plate. If you want to load it up with nuts and cake, go ahead. If you want to go back for seconds and load it up again with chips and carrots, go ahead. Although this sounds like a recipe for disaster, it actually works quite well for people for three reasons:

- You tend to take the two types of food you want most. People who love desserts don't work their way up to desserts. They'll start with the desserts, and then stop.
- You tend to not overfill your plate. Putting only two things on our plate helps keep our serving sizes somewhat small because we psychologically don't want to overload on a particular item.
- You tend to not go back more than two times. In one study we did on the Rule of Two, 83 percent of people only made one or two additional returns to the buffet.

Using some of these easy rules can help you take the focus off the food and pay more attention to what really makes the holidays special — your family and friends.