

Get the Facts - Thanksgiving Recovery

Myth:

Thanksgiving dinner was so bad that now I must diet and exercise for weeks to catch up.

Facts:

If you celebrate Thanksgiving, it can sometimes feel more like a binge eating holiday than a giving thanks holiday. Many will sit with family and friends with a plate piled as high as possible, perhaps even competing with others as to who can eat more. Even for the fitness enthusiasts, tracking food and moderation are near impossible. Trust me I understand the attempt to limit yourself on Thanksgiving only to look down at your third serving of mashed potatoes dwindling away while almost automatically reaching for your first piece of pumpkin pie.

I am not here to burst your bubble and talk about how bad the food is for you (partially because I don't want to hear that either). What I do want to talk about is how badly people feel afterwards. There is this idea of a massive debt people are now in because of badly they have eaten. The next few days may consist of extreme exercise, diet, or other ways to make up for how bad you were the Thursday before. This huge jump from the norm makes it impossible to maintain and leads to an inevitable crash of poor habits. I have also seen this give a bad impression of healthy eating and exercise.

One way to help with all of this is what's known as a "hedonic deviation" or in more common terms, a cheat meal. A large proportion of people who make significant changes to their diets schedule a planned day or meal where they eat foods they otherwise would not allow. Studies have shown that this planned meal helps people stay on the wagon several ways. First, it gives people something to look forward to. Too many lose track of the purpose of the change in lifestyle and need some more motivation than just health outcomes. Second, it provides small goals to strive for rather than one larger goal which may take months or years to reach. Smaller, closer goals or breaks help keep you focused and gives smaller more tangible rewards throughout the process. Finally, it helps with cravings. So many drop unhealthy foods or habits so quickly that they soon crave them even more than before. This tactic allows the sense of "just one more week and I can have McDonalds again" rather than "I really want McDonalds; too bad it's gone forever."

This can be applied to Thanksgiving, Halloween, Christmas, or any other occasion where you know you will eat poorly but still want to enjoy it with loved ones and not have to think about the health consequences. A few weeks or months before hand (depending on how hard you go on Thanksgiving) begin a meal plan. Cut out some less healthy options and replace with something better. Add one gym session a week rather than killing yourself in the gym after the holiday. Rather than accruing a massive debt on thanksgiving, build some credit beforehand.

Conclusion:

Planned cheat meals are a great way to introduce someone into a new, healthier, lifestyle without the fear of losing their favorite bad habits forever. Try with frequent cheat meals and slowly space them out longer until the cravings or habits start to disappear. Apply this to yourself, your clients, or your patients for a more gradual transition. Let's face it, nothing ever works when it's dropped cold turkey (pun alert).

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Reference:

- Vale, R. C., Pieters, R., & Zeelenberg, M. (2016). The benefits of behaving badly on occasion: Successful regulation by planned hedonic deviations. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 26*(1), 17-28. doi:10.1016/j.jcps.2015.05.001