

Just try it

Your Thanksgiving Game Plan

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Thanksgiving is a wonderful time for family and friends to gather, enjoy traditional foods and appreciate all we have. At the same time, it can be a challenging time for parents. In addition to the usual busy schedules, there is more planning, food preparation and potential for holiday stress, making it difficult to keep up with good nutrition and staying active.

Whether you are hosting Thanksgiving dinner or bringing a dish to share, a little planning can make for a healthy and fun holiday. Below are some tips and strategies for creating a Thanksgiving Game Plan that works.

Simplify Thanksgiving

If Thanksgiving is at your house, simplify your menu. Having fewer side dishes and desserts means fewer hours spent in the kitchen before and during the holiday. If you want the full spread, then delegate. Ask friends and family to bring their favorite healthy dish or assign them to an appetizer, vegetable dish or dessert, while you focus on the meat and potatoes.

Don't forget to ask for help in the kitchen, both during preparation and clean-up. Include the kids. Many people are happy to keep track of the gravy, pour drinks, replenish appetizers and more. I'm a big fan of using dishwasher-safe dinnerware to decrease the number of dishes to be washed by hand. Enlist all the help you can get for dish washing, dish drying and packaging up left overs.

Plan Ahead

Writing down the meal and grocery list can save time and reduce stress. Making two shopping lists, one for perishable items and one for nonperishable groceries, is most efficient. That way you can purchase the nonperishable foods well in advance when you are doing your usual grocery shopping. Then, the fresh, perishable food can be purchased all at once a few days before Thanksgiving.

Lighten Up

Most families have traditional holiday foods they don't want to go without. Unfortunately, many of these recipes are loaded with fat, sugar, salt or a combination of all three. The good news is that many recipes have more sugar and fat than is needed and can be modified to be healthier while still tasting great. Here are suggestions to improve the nutritional quality in traditional recipes:

- Use fat-free chicken broth to baste the turkey and make gravy.
- Decrease the oil or butter in a recipe by one-quarter to one-third.
- Use plain yogurt, Greek yogurt or low-fat sour cream for creamy dips and casseroles.
- Use evaporated skim milk instead of cream for mashed potatoes.
- Make sure there are at least two vegetable dishes being served.
- Serve raw vegetables with hummus or low-fat dip as an appetizer.

You can encourage your child to choose some of these foods over the less healthy choices. Another option is to start a new family food tradition by trying one new, healthy recipe that your kids help prepare, or modify a traditional recipe into a healthier version, such as the recipes here.

Cranberry Relish

I have childhood memories of the canned cranberry products that were served (with the mold of the can still visible) at our Thanksgiving dinner. I wasn't a fan, so this recipe from my mother-in-law was a fresh, wonderful addition to our Thanksgiving dinner!. It works great with leftover turkey sandwiches too.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 (16 oz.) package whole, raw cranberries, washed
- ½ medium orange, cut into 8 sections
- Peel of ½ orange, grated
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup pecans, chopped (optional)

PREPARATION

Combine half package of cranberries, half the orange sections and 1/3 cup sugar in food processor and pulse until chopped.

Add remaining cranberries, orange sections and sugar and chop until smooth.

Refrigerate at least 2 hours and up to 2 days to allow flavors to blend.

If adding pecans, add just before serving and stir to combine.

Makes about 2 ½ cups.

Sweet Potato Casserole

Although I call this a sweet potato casserole, I actually use yams because I like their bright orange color. My three boys love this recipe with the toasted marshmallows on top. However, the adults don't like the added sweetness, so I cover half the dish with marshmallows and the other half with pecans to satisfy everyone.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 pounds garnet yams, washed and pierced with a fork
- ½ cup evaporated skim milk
- 6 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon grated orange peel
- ½ teaspoon nutmeg
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1-2 cups mini-marshmallows

PREPARATION – AT LEAST ONE DAY IN ADVANCE:

1. Bake yams at 375° F for 1 ¼ hours, or until soft when pierced with a fork. Cool completely.
 2. Peel skin and cut potatoes into chunks. Transfer to a large mixing bowl or food processor.
 3. In a small bowl, combine brown sugar, orange peel, cinnamon, nutmeg, salt and pepper.
 4. Add evaporated skim milk and sugar/spices mix to mixing bowl or food processor. Blend to desired consistency.
 5. Transfer mixture to a baking dish. Cover and refrigerate overnight (or up to two days) to blend flavors.
 6. On Thanksgiving Day, remove potatoes from refrigerator and bring to room temperature.
 7. Bake covered for 25 minutes. Remove cover, sprinkle with marshmallow and pecans, as desired, and bake until marshmallows are golden brown, about 3-5 minutes.
- Makes about 10 ½ cup servings

Jill West, RDN, is an accomplished speaker and author of 400 MOMS: Discover What 400 Nutrition Experts Feed Their Kids. As a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist and Certified Health Coach with a private practice in Lafayette, she has worked with thousands of individuals and families helping them make healthy lifestyle changes that are practical and realistic for the whole family. Jill lives in the East Bay with her husband and three boys. For more information, visit www.400MOMS.com