HEART-healthy meals require planning ahead to have happy holiday feasts, by thinking about how to avoid potential pitfalls - but it doesn’t mean starving yourself before and after an overindulgence, nor does it mean you or your guests have to go on a diet; although it is easier said than it might sound, says the November 2013 issue of the Harvard Medical School’s Harvard Heart Letter.

Whether you’re worried about your weight or your cholesterol levels and blood pressure, there are some smart strategies you can adopt to minimize the negative health effects of holiday feasts and parties.

• Kathy McManus, director of the nutrition department at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women’s Hospital, offers this eight-point plan to help make holiday feasts happy and healthy:

1. Plan ahead - Find out when the meal will be served - If the holiday feast is at, say, 3 p.m., eat your usual heart-healthy breakfast and have a little snack before going to the event.

Snacks should include a small amount of protein and some carbohydrate, both of which can keep you from being overly hungry and may prevent you from overeating - Snack ideas may include a choice of:
Helpful tips in planning your heart-healthy holiday dinners

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1. Choose a healthy starter: a) 1 cup of plain Greek yogurt; 

b) 1 cup of low-salt chicken vegetable soup; or 

c) 1 tablespoon of peanut butter on a single slice of whole wheat bread.

2. Limit appetizers - Most appetizers are high in saturated fat and sodium - As a guest, bring a colorful plate of raw vegetables (such as broccoli, carrots, red and yellow peppers, cucumbers and peapods) and have a healthy dip, such as hummus, homemade salsa, or nonfat plain yogurt with dill.

3. Eat favorites, skip the rest - Many holiday meals are buffets or served family-style - Check out which foods are being served and choose a small amount of the ones that are really important for you to have at holiday time and skip the foods you can have any time, such as rolls and butter.

4. Savor the flavor - Once you have chosen your food, savor every bite, while talking with friends and family at the table (that is really what it’s all about).

Don’t rush through the meal - take at least 25 minutes for you to finish your meal.

If you want seconds, wait at least 10 minutes before having small additional portions.

5. A little goes a long way - Take a small piece of dessert - or better still, split a piece with a family member.

Or else, just have a nice cup of coffee or tea, if dessert isn’t really important to you, says McManus.
6. Watch the alcohol - Alcohol adds calories - and might make you lose your focus on your healthy eating plan - if you decide to have a drink, be moderate.

7. Walk away from leftovers - Don’t sit around the table if there’s still food readily available - get up and help with the dishes or see if anyone wants to take a walk.

8. Stay active - A holiday doesn’t mean skipping your activity routine - try to get some movement in before your holiday meal.

Arrange some fun activities to enjoy over the holiday with the people you love, says McManus.

Susan B. Roberts, Ph.D., director of Tufts’ HNRCA Energy Metabolism Laboratory and author of “The ‘i’ diet,” suggests additional strategies to keep the holidays from wiping out all your healthy-eating progress from the rest of 2013:

9. Start early, filling up on fiber - One or even two days before the big meal, prepare for a particular impending feeding frenzy - add to your regular meals two or three half-cup servings of a high-fiber cereal, a satiety-boost that helps you gain control and fullness.

Thus, when dinner is served, you’ll automatically want to eat far less, says Roberts.

10. Zero out skippable choices - If you’re not really fond of grandma’s mashed potatoes, don’t put even a dollop on your plate - “By not looking at, smelling and especially tasting even a single bite of the mundane items, you avoid revving up metabolic hunger signals unnecessarily and can save hundreds of calories, adds Roberts.

11. Control your food microenvironment - According to Roberts, multiple research studies have shown that the proximity of food determines how much you load onto your plate, so keep the
high-calorie foods and alcohol moving down the table away from you, making sure the least-healthy but most tempting platters don’t end up within easy reach.

And even your choice of dinner companions can make a difference - “Short, skinny neighbors will serve themselves smaller portions and tempt you to eat less than tall, overweight or athletic ones,” Roberts says.

According to Roberts, the typical adult gains between five and eight pounds in the short interval between Thanksgiving and New Year - the equivalent of eating about 20,000 excess calories, or 550 calories a day beyond what you need to maintain weight.

For many individuals, however, their real downfall during the holidays isn’t the occasional big feast but the day-to-day temptations - suddenly there’s candy everywhere, co-workers bring holiday-meal leftovers to the office and eating opportunities stack up faster than letters to Santa.

While one piece of fudge won’t undo 11 months of healthy living, letting one piece turn into a dozen, nibbled one at a time, certainly will, concludes the health letter.