

December 2011 Newsletter



Miles and Anna with their son Tor, who clearly appears to be thinking about the seasonally-specific exceptions to the whole food Mediterranean diet that lie ahead.

Occupy Christmas!

*"I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."
Luke 2:10*

We could fill this newsletter with holiday eating tips but we can already see your eyes glazing over. The thing is, most of us know what we're supposed to do. The tricky part is actually **doing** it while dancing backwards in high heels through the minefield of obligatory gifting, Christmas cards, party schedules, complicated family politics, and platters laden with our favorite holiday calorie combinations that tend to gang up on us this time of year. Take, for example, those lumpy-looking melt-in-the-mouth cookies rolled in powdered sugar. Some of us feel particularly victimized by them, but this is the time of year to seek reconciliation. Anyway, a silly little cookie (or two) isn't going to hurt anyone.

It's true – the studies show that eating a whole food Mediterranean diet reduces our risk of cardiac events by about 70%, death by 56% and cancer by 60%.¹ That doesn't mean, however, that

we can't make some exceptions for special occasions by enjoying a few slices of Christmas ham or truffles or fudge or peppermint bark or eggnog or latkes or whatever treats happen to be your particular favorites . . . but don't let the exception clause sabotage your health goals. Ask yourself, "am I eating this because it's a special treat or because I'm tired and hungry and would eat a Christmas tree ornament if it was covered in sugar?" Indulge mindfully, and end your year on a triumphant note.

This could be YOU on New Year's Eve!

You ate a good breakfast – a whole orange (not juice) followed by a couple of eggs scrambled with a chopped tomato, and a mug of tea. Then you took a brisk walk outdoors for about 15 minutes, until you lost feeling in your fingers and toes. Before you left home for some last-minute shopping you grabbed a handful of almonds – not because you were particularly hungry but because you knew you probably would be by the time you accidentally met the gaze of a shameless apple fritter at Starbucks later.

At a party that evening you ate only one succulent puff pastry sausage thing, and then had three servings of decorative kale and some tasty-looking fruit garnishes. Next you hunted down anything that looked like a vegetable and filled your plate, and then added a slab of prime rib. (Remember this Risk Reduction Tip: A **second** slice of prime rib is a lot healthier than a **first** slice of banana cream pie.) You took a glass of punch that someone handed you, but you topped it up with some sparkling water.

With your tummy comfortably full and your head clear, you felt good enough to cross the finish line with a flourish, selecting a forkful or two of banana cream pie and one small cookie (maybe one of those lumpy-looking melt-in-the-mouth buttery cookies rolled in powdered sugar) from someone else's plate on your way. You haven't felt this ready for January since you took an afternoon nap on New Year's Eve, slept right through the fireworks, and woke up the next year!

¹ Lorigeril et al. Circulation 1999;99:779-85

A few little suggestions

(What's that? Some holiday sustenance tips? Glad you asked.)

Watch your fork

It's easy to eat without really thinking in social gatherings. Plus, you'll enjoy it more if you pay attention to every forkful. And spoonful. Two tips: under-fill your plate (except for vegetables) and stop eating as soon as you are satisfied.

Begin with breakfast

Think protein + good fat + whole vegetable and/or fruit. For the truly non-stop morning, try a hard-boiled egg and a banana, and a handful of raw almonds grabbed on your way to the door. However, taking some time over breakfast to plan your day has a clearly favorable cost-benefit ratio.

Keep good food handy

Have it hanging around on your kitchen counter and in your car and on your desk – again, raw nuts and whole fruit are good choices, like easy-to-peel seedless Satsuma mandarins or apple wedges.

Get some exercise every day

Recruit an exercise buddy. Try to get outside for a few minutes every morning. Some say there is no bad weather, just bad gear. If you disagree, you can join those who stride around the mall or skip rope in the basement.

Sidestep liquid calories

If you are offered sweet or alcoholic drinks at a party, top them up with sparkling water. Hey! Your drink can last for hours! Our sidestep strategy is to bring our own bottles of sparkling water (we like lemon-lime *Talking Rain*) to holiday celebrations.

Re-gift candy and cookies . . .

. . . before your resolve weakens. The pleasure they offer is brief, but the inner glow of self-righteousness can last for days. If you find yourself stuck perchance with any of those lumpy-looking melt-in-the-mouth buttery cookies (with ground pecans) rolled in powdered sugar, feel free to just send them to this address and we'll dispose of them appropriately.

The joy factor

This can be a truly joyous time of year, but it's easy to get overwhelmed by unreasonable expectations and the seeming impossibility of squeezing in a quiet dinner at home and a good night's sleep. However, evidence seems to show that people

who eat more whole foods and get outdoor exercise and adequate sleep are far less likely to be depressed. So, making healthy choices around this time of year nourish our minds as well as bodies. As an added advantage, being well fed and well rested will put us in a much better position to bring more cheer to someone else. Joy is contagious.

Finally, some tips for eating out

This is a time of year when we can find ourselves eating out whether we want to or not. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

Consider ordering an appetizer or two instead of a main course – the servings are smaller, the food is simpler, and the variety keeps things interesting. Avoid the bread-based or deep fried stuff.

Outsmart the menu. Ask for a double or triple serving of vegetables to replace potatoes and rice. The restaurant may even create a side of their vegetables-of-the-day for you. Order simply-prepared meats like grilled fish or steak instead of meat-based mixtures like pasta bolognese. Aim for roughly ¼ animal protein and ¾ plant foods.

Beware soups, sauces, and dressings – these generally hide lots of bad fats and sugars.

When choosing a salad, pick one with the most colorful greens. In the case of lettuce, the darker green, the better. Avoid trimmings like bacon bits, croutons, and roasted salted sunflower seeds.

Just say *no* to soft drinks and fruit juice! Order a tall glass of chilled sparkling water with lemon instead. Restrict alcohol to one drink for women or two drinks for men.

Resist the basket of warm bread. If the others at the table agree, ask your waiter to skip it entirely. Even after choosing sensibly from a menu, it's easy to neutralize healthy choices by indulging in calorie-dense extras that are hard to resist.

Speaking Events

12/15/2011 – Providence Willamette Falls Retiree Talk: Miles Hassell MD: *How a Greek Grandmother would help you solve the health care crisis.* Oregon City, Oregon.

1/23/2012 – OHSU Nutrition Elective: Miles Hassell MD: *Nutrition in the Primary Care Setting.* Portland, Oregon. Physician audience only.

Miles and crew wish you a joyful and peaceful Christmas and New Year!