

Halloween is just around the corner and candy seems to be everywhere (and at good prices!!) The temptation to indulge is high as we enter into what is a long string of holidays (from Halloween through until Easter!) With the growing epidemics of obesity and Type 2 diabetes, maybe we need to consider more health-conscious ways to celebrate holidays. We can choose lower calorie alternatives, watch portion sizes and switch the focus off food. Here are some suggestions of healthier, lower calorie treats:

- Packages of gum (also prevents dental caries!)
- Small packages of microwave popcorn (offer whole grain and fiber!)
- Packages of instant cocoa mix
- Peanuts in the shell
- Juice boxes
- Individual wrapped sticks of beef jerky
- Mozzarella cheese sticks
- Small boxes of raisins
- Coins-nickels, dimes or quarters
- Pencils, stickers

If you do choose candy, consider smaller sizes. If your children come home with a bagful, allow them to eat a few pieces each day until the candy is gone. This helps to teach the concept of moderation.

What about all we are hearing regarding the health benefits of chocolate? There is new research that certain types of chocolate may help to lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease. Chocolate comes from the cacao (or cocoa) bean. The beans of this plant are extremely rich in flavonoids. Flavonoids are potent plant antioxidants which can exert a positive influence on health by neutralizing free radicals that contribute to aging and promote disease. Dark chocolate contains the highest amounts of these compounds. Choose a brand with a high cocoa content (70% or higher) such as Dove or Hershey's Extra dark. Cocoa powder is another way to get a leaner chocolate fix since the cocoa beans are ground and stripped of fat (cocoa butter). It's great for low-fat baking. But even with healthful flavonoids, chocolate remains a high calorie food that doesn't offer many nutrients to our diets. We need to moderate the amount and frequency of eating it. And that's more of a challenge at this time of the year when it's so readily available. Keep in mind that a balanced diet and plenty of activity is still the best recommendation for heart healthy living!

Now let's focus for a minute on a **truly** healthy food for this season! Winter squash is a highly nutritious vegetable we see appearing in our grocery stores at this time of the year. (Varieties such as acorn, butternut, pumpkin, spaghetti, hubbard, turban). It is an excellent source of vitamin A in the form of beta-carotene. Beta-carotene is a powerful antioxidant found to provide health benefits such as preventing heart disease, assisting in blood sugar regulation, decreasing the risk of colon cancer, and lessening the severity of asthma and arthritis. Sometimes we don't prepare this vegetable because it can be time consuming or we don't know how to fix it. It has a wonderfully sweet flavor on it's own and we don't need to drown it in butter or sugar to make it edible! Here are some easy ideas that may encourage you to prepare and eat winter squash. And don't forget pumpkin and squash seeds which make healthful snacks. They are high in fiber as well but also rich in calories so measure and limit your portion!

<http://appetizer.allrecipes.com/az/RstdWintrSqshSds.asp>

### **Tips for Preparing Winter Squash:**

Rinse off any dirt before using.

Baking: To bake, halve small squash length-wise, scoop out the seeds and strings. Cut large squash into serving-sized pieces. Place squash, cut-side down in a foil-lined pan. Pour 1/4-inch of

water into the pan, cover with foil, and bake in a 350-400oF oven until the squash is tender when pierced with a knife. Halfway through baking, the squash halves may be turned, cut side up, brushed with melted butter or oil, and sprinkled with brown sugar and spices.

Cooking Time: Squash halves or whole small pumpkins, 40 to 45 minutes; cut-up squash, 15 to 25 minutes.

Microwaving: Arrange squash halves, cut-side up, in a shallow microwaveable dish, cover and cook until tender, rotating dish halfway through the cooking time. Let stand 5 minutes after cooking. Cooking Time: for squash halves, 7 to 10 minutes; for chunks, 8 minutes.

See <http://www.hormel.com/templates/template.asp?catitemid=120&id=830> for more info and wonderful pictures!

### **A Few Quick Serving Ideas:**

Top puréed cooked winter squash with cinnamon and maple syrup or parmesan cheese and black pepper.

Steam cubes of winter squash and then puree/mash with olive oil, and spices or extracts of your choice.

Top "strings" of spaghetti squash with pasta sauce.

Add cubes of winter squash to your favorite vegetable soup recipe or make it the basis of a creamy soup.

It can also be stuffed with meat, beans and/or whole grains for a complete meal.

Serving suggestions: Baked or steamed winter squash is delicious mashed or pureed, like sweet potatoes. To enhance its natural sweetness, combine squash with any of the following; baked or steamed pears or apples, bananas, chopped cranberries; lemon, lime, or orange juice; almond or vanilla extract; fresh or powdered ginger, curry powder; cinnamon; nutmeg; mace; cardamom; cloves; allspice or pumpkin pie spice; brown sugar; maple syrup; or honey. For a savory dish, mash the cooked squash with sautéed onions or garlic and herbs, or combine chunks of squash with cooked corn, tomatoes, and bell peppers.

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