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Special diets figure into feasts, too

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Cinda Williams Chima
University of Akron

Each December, Mary-Louise Kirk throws a party for more than 100 people. And every year it gets harder.

Kirk is a trustee at George E. Fedor Manor in Lakewood. Annually, the board of trustees hosts a holiday luncheon for residents, who must be at least 62.

"We used to do a party at night with cake, and fewer and fewer people were coming," says Kirk. "When I asked why, they said, We can't have cake, we can't eat icing.' It seems like more and more of them are diabetic. The board decided we needed to do something else."

So now the residents celebrate at lunch. But the holidays are the traditional season for feasting, and Kirk won't settle for anything short of fabulous.

"I want the plate to be gorgeous," she says. "The problem for me is dessert!"

Many hosts struggle to plan celebratory feasts suitable for special diets that won't disappoint everyone else. Before you remake your holiday menu, ask your guests which -- if any -- foods they avoid and how you can best accommodate them.

Give them a rundown of what you're planning to serve. You may find they'll do just fine, as long as they have options.

For people with chronic diseases, the key to freedom is education. Contrary to what most people believe, there are few forbidden foods for people with diabetes, heart disease and other health conditions -- though there are definitely better and worse choices. It's chiefly a matter of quantity, and balancing foods with medications.

For instance, depending on their energy needs, people with diabetes may be allowed three to five carbohydrate choices at a meal. Those carbohydrates can come from bread, potatoes, stuffing, starchy vegetables or dessert. Your diabetic guest who wants dessert can probably have it -- if he cuts back on carbohydrates somewhere else. With education, people with diabetes can also learn to match their medication to their carb intake. If they eat more carbs, they take more medicine. That provides maximum flexibility.

One advantage at the holidays is that there is usually enough variety that those who are watching their carbs or sodium can find suitable choices from what's offered. A considerate host can make it easier, however. See my tips for accommodating guests on special diets.

Cinda Williams Chima is a registered dietitian on the faculty of University of Akron. Her column runs periodically in Taste. E-mail nutrition and weight-control questions, labeled "Nutri-News," to food@plaind.com

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