

Festive occasions such as birthdays, Easter and Christmas are fun times for children and adults alike. That said, when it comes to food, those typically offered during this time tend to be high in sugar, fat and salt. In recent years, however, we have seen a shift in parent's attitudes with many seeking out healthier options and inspirations for celebratory occasions. This fact sheet aims to put food and festivities into context and explain how simple swaps can STILL be fun without putting a strain on children's health.

## Setting the scene

Traditionally birthdays, Easter and Christmas are all celebrated with food at the heart of the excitement and joy. While this is to be encouraged, for some of us, we may need to look at the "treats" that are offered especially when it comes to their portion sizes. Given the regularity of festive occasions – birthdays with family, friends and again at school, multiple Easter egg hunts and Christmas festivities spread over a couple of weeks exposures to less favourable foods can soon add up. So, it becomes easy to see why many parents are looking for alternatives.



## The Wider Perspective

There is no getting away from discretionary foods (those generally high in sugar but containing little in the way of nutrients), typically referred to as 'treats' - they are simply everywhere. However, one thing that we can do is to bring healthier foods 'up' to the same level. Discretionary foods should not be put on a pedestal. Instead we can look to:

- Giving fresh fruit and a few mini buttons together.
- Giving discretionary foods in the right portions (our Little Portions fact sheet will help with this).
- Giving discretionary foods on a weekly rather than a daily basis.
- Empowering children. Ask them – do you think your tummy has had enough?
- Educating children. Inform them that certain sticky foods or those containing high amounts of sugar aren't good for their teeth in large quantities.

Evidence is beginning to show that 'mindful eating' i.e. helping children to become savvy and intuitive about what they eat but in a non-controlling way may help children to have a healthier outlook.<sup>1</sup> So it's best to avoid restricting or forbidding foods as this can make children want them more. Instead look to talk to them about making the right choices.

## Sugary Spiral

Table 1 summarises the sugar content of some typical festive foods and compares these against recommendations. In the UK it is advised that young children (aged 4 to 6 years) have no more than 19 grams of free sugars (those typically added to foods) a day.<sup>2</sup> This is the equivalent to about 5 sugar cubes.<sup>2</sup> As can be seen, numbers quickly add up and can really tip the balance.



Table 1: The sugar content of typical festive treats.

Festive Foods	Sugar (g)	In relation to guidelines.
A sprinkle of sprinkles (8.5g)	6	A THIRD of the sugar guideline.
Small bag of chewy sweets (16g)	8	NEARLY HALF of the sugar guideline.
Small bag of chocolate buttons (14g)	8	NEARLY HALF of the sugar guideline.
Portion of ice cream (per serving)	12	TWO-THIRDS of the sugar guideline.
Slice of birthday cake (58g)	34	NEARLY TWICE the sugar guideline.
Small sized Easter Egg (72g)	40	TWICE the sugar guideline.
Medium sized Easter Egg (127g)	75	FOUR TIMES the sugar guideline.
Large sized Easter Egg (282g)	157	EIGHT TIMES the sugar guideline.

Source: Data as reported by manufacturers.



So when it comes to such festive occasions – we don't want to become the festive food Grinch! It's really more about portion control, talking to children about the importance of variety, saving some for later and how overindulging on certain foods may make them feel afterwards.

## Strategies

There are also plenty of ways to make healthy foods just as fun and exciting. As shown in Table 2 even subtle differences such as using low sugar jelly or reduced sugar cake baking can dramatically cut children's sugar intakes. We have also teamed up with Catherine Lippe, Registered Nutritionist, mum of two and founder of Catherine Lippe Nutrition to see what healthy eating festivity tactics can be put into place.

Table 2: Festive foodie swaps.

Festive Foods	
Reduced sugar cake baking	Festive cakes can be baked using ½ the sugar. Ingredients such as sugar and honey can also be swapped with banana, dates, raisins, shredded apples. This allows a similar sweet kick without all the surplus sugar. These also provide more filling fibre, vitamins and minerals.
Cake alternatives	Fruit scones, tea cakes and hot cross buns can all make delicious treats without the excess sugar.
Low sugar jelly	Low sugar jelly is an easy swap and does not provide excess calories and sugar. Add in some fruit for a colour and nutrient boost. Check out our Let's Eat website section to see some fun examples.
Fruit kebabs	Fruits are bright and colourful and look wonderful laid out on plates. Try making some fruit platters, fruit kebabs or a chocolate fondue with fruits to dip in.
Trail mix	For children over 5 years of age bags of nuts, seeds, dried fruits and some chocolate chips are a novel idea and the perfect party bag insert.
Add some entertainment	Focus on other sources of entertainment alongside foods – colouring, games, singing and having a dance.



## TOP FESTIVE TIPS FROM CATHERINE LIPPE

- Allow cakes, chocolate, sweets etc to be part of these festivities but avoid making them the focus of the celebration.
- Bring a variety of foods into every festivity to encourage the idea that variety is always important, even at times of celebration. This helps to promote the idea that all foods are equal and all foods can be fun.
- If you want to bring a bit more fun to your party foods have a go at presenting them in different ways, e.g. using shape cutters to make interesting sandwich shapes, smiley face pizzas, fruit kebabs or the pepper train (pictured).
- Games, songs, topical stories, cultural practices, arts and crafts are also a really fun and important part of festivities. Bring these activities into your celebrations too.
- When cake, sweets and chocolates are offered, avoid telling your child 'no'. Restricting or forbidding foods can make them more desirable. Instead allow your child to enjoy these foods whilst they are available and focus on offering other foods later that day to promote variety.



### Conclusions

Festivities really don't need to be laden with sugary, salty and fatty foods to be fun. These can be the perfect time to be creative, get children involved and produce some healthy festive foods. Festive occasions are also an ideal time to enjoy quality time together as a family, rather than just simply focusing on foods. We really hope you like our ideas and would love to see any of your own.

### Please note

This fact sheet has been based on scientific evidence available at the time that it was written. The information contained in this commentary is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment. We recommend consultation with your doctor or health care professional if you have any concerns around your child's health.

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### References

1. Emley EA et al. (2017) Mindful feeding and child dietary health. *Eat Behav* 24:89-94.
2. SACN (2015) Carbohydrates and Health. London: TSO.

