How to Recover After Thanksgiving

Enjoy this Thanksgiving in moderation. But know that I have a recovery guide for getting you back on track no matter how your holiday looks.

November 25, 2020 By Michael Breus, PhD

It's hard to believe that Thanksgiving 2020 is right around the corner in the United States- and in so many minds is not only what to eat, or how to cook and season and turkey. Instead, many are wondering how different Thanksgiving will look this year.

In the past, I've discussed how to sleep well on Thanksgiving, from tips to avoid indigestion to limiting your alcohol. But this year, in light of everything that's happened, I want to shift focus: what happens if you do overindulge, or just get plain worn out?

The truth is there's nothing wrong with a celebration, and none of us stick to eating and sleeping routines perfectly year round. So this Thanksgiving, enjoy in moderation, but know that I have a recovery guide for getting you back on track, no matter how your Thanksgiving looks.

Thanksgiving Food Fatigue

Thanksgiving food fatigue is real, but not in the way you might think. For instance, while turkey is often blamed for causing Thanksgiving Day drowsiness, it's not so simple.

Turkey does contain tryptophan, which is involved in producing melatonin, the hormone that regulates sleep. In fact, protein rich food in general contains tryptophan, including eggs, yogurt, red meat, fish, and even nuts and seeds.

The Real Reason You Feel Tired After Thanksgiving Dinner

Thanksgiving food fatigue stems less from your roasted turkey and has more to do with fatigue after large meals, especially meals rich in fast digesting carbohydrates. The standard Thanksgiving dinner includes plenty of those: with sides, a main dish, and dessert, the average American consumes about 400 grams of carbohydrates in a single sitting!

It isn't just about the carbohydrates, but the type of carbohydrates consumed: most of these are simple sugars, from stuffing to Grandma's pumpkin pie.

All carbohydrates are broken down into glucose, but refined carbohydrates enter the bloodstream more quickly and spike blood sugar levels, causing the sudden peak and subsequent crash. In other words, excessive simple carbs drain your energy.

Thanksgiving Recovery Guide

Just because I study sleep and try to keep a healthy diet and even incorporate intermittent fasting in my daily life, doesn't mean I don't sometimes indulge. And on Thanksgiving in a strange 2020, I'm definitely enjoying a slice of pie.

But if you are feeling tired post meal, or even struggling for days after to get your sleep cycle back in check (leftovers can extend the effect of the actual Thanksgiving dinner), here are my top tips to get back on track and feel energized, just in time for holiday or even Black Friday shopping.

Here are my do's and don'ts for recovering after Thanksgiving.

Don't: Go Cold Turkey

Pun intended, I don't recommend going cold turkey on anything, whether that means cutting out all refined sugar or caffeine or swearing off a glass of wine. It's a common mistake that I also see when people make New Year's resolutions: the urge to immediately and drastically change habits.

Cutting every "fun" food from your diet is not only likely to backfire—research suggests that 50 percent of dieters actually end up putting on more weight—but it can even wreak havoc on your sleep cycles.

Do: Set a Regular Eating Schedule

Not eating enough during the day can cause a rise in cortisol levels, especially at night. That can spell for disrupted sleep cycles. The key is getting back to being consistent, whether you were a regular eater before Thanksgiving or not.

Everyone is different, which is why I recommend eating based upon your chronotype. Start by taking the Chronotype Quiz, then slowly adjust your schedule post Thanksgiving so you're getting protein, carbohydrates and fats at the times in tune with your body's natural biological clock. Patience is the key, as it could take your body a few days to adapt.

Don't: Punish Yourself With Exercise

I'm a huge advocate for getting a sweat on, but punishing workouts after a Thanksgiving meal can be damaging on a physical and emotional level.

For one, there is no need to "make up" for a heavier meal. Our bodies are incredibly resilient, and, so long as you adjust to regular eating and sleeping patterns, there's no need to worry about Thanksgiving indulgences long term. You're more likely to become injured if you overdo it, and may add unnecessary stress.

Do: Finish Thanksgiving With Light Activity

If you can, take a light walk after your Thanksgiving Dinner, especially if you ate an earlier or mid day meal. Just 15 minutes of sunlight a day helps regulate your body temperature and internal body clock. While getting morning sun is ideal, a short walk can boost your mood, stimulate

digestion, reduce stress, and get you out of that post-meal stupor.

Don’t: Ignore Stress

Whether it’s arguing with your family about politics after a stressful election or thinking about the holidays or even the public health crisis, letting stress go unchecked is a big mistake for your mental health, energy levels, and sleep.

Do: Find Coping Mechanisms

The link between stress and sleep is something I’ve written about often. Take time to relax at night, turn off your electronics, and talk to a mental health provider if you need to. While it’s normal to be stressed, especially this time of year and especially in 2020, you don’t have to suffer.

Since the Thanksgiving table can be a source of stressful conversations, try a fun game like Table Topics to keep the conversation light.

Don’t Switch to a Low Fat Diet

That average Thanksgiving feast? Not only does it contain nearly 400 grams of carbohydrates; it also packs in 124 grams of fat, or 200 percent of the recommended intake for the average woman!

But that doesn’t mean switching to a low fat diet is the answer. In fact, low fat diets have been linked to excessive fatigue during the day, and disrupted, or non restorative sleep at night, while ketogenic diets, which are higher in fact, may improve sleep quality and increase both slow wave and REM sleep.

Do: Listen to Your Body

Eating light the day or two after Thanksgiving makes sense for some, but it doesn’t call for trimming out all fats. Instead, trade out saturated or trans fats (hydrogenated and partially hydrogenated ingredients) for healthy fats like nuts, seeds, avocados and fatty fish.

And allow yourself a little indulgence, even if it is light. If I’m eating on a schedule that works for me, even after Thanksgiving, I treat myself to a fresh bowl of fruit topped with slivered almonds and just a touch of natural honey.

No matter what holiday you celebrate, nearly all of us celebrations revolve around food. Feel free to keep this guide handy; it applies to all big food days, not just a holiday or celebration!

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