I love to bake cookies at the holidays. Are there simple ways to make it healthier?

by Robin Stahl, RDN

It’s hard to alter traditional cookies, isn’t it? Real butter + sugar = delicious! Butter isn’t the primary concern though, it’s sugar. Is baking with sugar substitute the answer? For me it is a solid NO. It doesn’t taste the same and is not really any healthier. Ideas from a Registered Dietitian:

- Make the cookies small. Try bite sized so you can still eat a cookie that is perfect (just like Grandma’s), but you are not overdoing it.
- Add some fiber….carefully….by adding finely ground oatmeal, whole-wheat flour or ground almonds for part of the flour.
- Try reducing the amount of sugar in the recipe by 25 percent. The taste and texture will be wonderful still.

For more detailed direction:
food52.com/blog/15911-what-experts-know-about-reducing-sugar-in-baking-recipes

I am so busy during the holidays. How can I keep active?

by Kathleen Connelly, BA, ACE Certified Personal Trainer and Health Coach

The holidays are a wonderful time of year… wonderful to keep active despite all the work and family gatherings we love to attend! To help stay active be creative! Bundle up and invite others to participate in winter activities like ice skating, sledding, or skiing. Sign up for an organized walk/run to support a charity. Visit Tuxedo Brothers Event Management at tuxbro.com to find an event near you. If you track daily steps go holiday shopping with friends or family, or visit a walk-through holiday light display instead of a drive through option. If you are traveling, research gyms you can use or take small fitness items like resistance bands or dumbbells to use at any location. Remember, mindset can be a game changer! For example, instead of looking at walking as something you should/have to do, look at it as something you are blessed to be able to do. No matter what December looks like for you, physical activity can still be a part of your holiday plans!
How to Create the Best Playlist for Your Workout

by Beth Gregory, BS, Health Coach

Exercise and good music go hand in hand! Our bodies love to move to music and research proves that listening to music during a workout is extremely motivating. Your music choices can definitely get you pumped, boost your mood and help you power through your workout - even when you are not feeling it!

Music also has the power to influence your heart rate, make exercise seem easier and more enjoyable. Music can distract you from fatigue and hard work, as well as improve your focus and extend your workout. Let’s learn how to build that perfect playlist!

Structure your playlist around all the phases of your workout session. The BPM, beat per minute refers to the speed of the music, or tempo. BPM should mirror the heart rate you are trying to achieve. For example, for the warm-up, you might want to start with a song on the lower end, around 90 BPM, then increase the intensity up to 100-140 BPM as you prepare for the workout. Try “Get Down On It” by Kool & The Gang at 110 BPM. Try this website to find the BPM of your favorite songs: songbpm.com

High tempo and high intensity music are preferred for motivation during the hardest part of the workout. The range will vary dependent upon the type of exercise performed. Listen to Prince, “Baby I’m a Star” during your next cycling workout at 138 BPM.

The cool down should consist of about 3-4 songs that will slow your heart rate down while you stretch and recover. Choose music with a BPM range of 60-90 BPM, like “Landslide” by Fleetwood Mac.

If you do not want to spend time creating your own playlist, music streaming services, such as Spotify, have playlists already created, just push play! Look for your favorite genre, era or type of workout!

Take a listen to this month’s playlist (pg. 4) to get samples of these types of songs. Then, take some time to create a playlist that will fuel your next workout!
Even though the slow cooker appliance has been around for decades, and there are several new kitchen appliances, it still deserves space in your kitchen. For example, cooking a tough, inexpensive cut of meat all day in the slow cooker turns it into a moist, tender piece of meat that is ready for many recipes.

Slow cookers do a great job with saucy meats that are ready for a bun, tortilla shell or a leaf of Romaine. Think pulled pork, Italian beef or teriyaki chicken wraps! When hosting a group, a slow cooker can act as a server for soups, stews, or the filling for sandwiches.

The healthy thing about a slow cooker is that you are in complete control of the ingredients. Lean meat, fresh or frozen vegetables, and lower sodium seasonings come together to make a meal. If you need to add some ‘filler’, cook pasta or rice separately and serve them on the side, offer toppings that will add individuality to each plate.

Tender vegetables are at risk of overcooking, so tougher types like carrots, celery, cabbage, corn and potatoes are better choices for the slow cooker. Just add the quick-cooking veggies in the last hour. Pasta and rice are often mushy after hours of slow cooking. Many recipes call for them, but use with discretion. Dairy products can curdle over the long cooking times, so it is best to add cheese or cream at the end of the cooking time.

There are many possibilities for using your slow cooker: numerous cuts of meat, soups, stew, bone broth, oats, porridge and beverages, just to name a few. Using a slow cooker gives you a hands-off way to cook while you are away doing you. Discover endless easy, delicious recipes online.

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**SLOW COOKER SPICE TEA**

2 tea bags, regular black or decaffeinated
1 cup boiling water
8 cups juice (Choose from cranberry, pomegranate, low sugar, sugar free, juice combinations)
¼ cup granulated sugar (optional)
1 lemon, sliced
1 orange, sliced
4 cinnamon sticks
¼ tsp ground cloves

**DIRECTIONS:**

1. Pour boiling water over tea bags in slow cooker. Cover with lid and allow the tea to steep for 5 minutes.
2. Add juice, sugar if desired, fruit and spices to tea. Stir to mix. Cover with lid and cook on low for 2-3 hours or on high for 1-2 hours.
4. Refrigerate left over tea and use within 5 days.

**Nutritional Information —**

Serving size: 1 cup. Calculations reflect use of sugar free cranberry juice, no added sugar.

Calories: 8  Carbohydrate: 2g
Protein: 0g  Fat: 0g
Fiber: 0g  Sodium: 0mg

Recipe adapted from Pumpkin 'N Spice website
I don’t need to sell you on the negative effects of clutter. Where there’s clutter in your home, there will be clutter in you — either physically, mentally, or emotionally.

Clutter: a collection of things lying about in an untidy state. Different kinds of clutter, e.g., physical, digital, mental, and emotional, signify different emotional messages. Clutter can affect our anxiety levels, sleep, and ability to focus. It can also make us less productive, triggering coping and avoidance strategies that make us more likely to snack on junk food and watch TV shows.

**Decluttering sharpens your mind**
Research found that decluttering helps your brain focus. Clutter competes for your attention. Organized environments lead to a sharp and productive mind.

**Decluttering creates a sense of confidence**
Decluttering your space can help create a sense of confidence and self-efficacy. It will give you the power of decision-making and problem-solving.

Decluttering and simplifying are not about depriving yourself of things you love. Just the opposite. Oftentimes we buy things to make life easier or more enjoyable. In reality too much of a good thing can become a bad thing. The more we own, the more we have to work to pay for, pick up, clean, maintain, organize, look for, repair, etc.

**Cleaning and organizing reduce anxiety**
When things feel out of order, it can make us feel scattered and anxious. Creating order relieves that anxiety.

**Decluttering releases stress**
Clutter affects everyone, regardless of who created the mess. We’ve all snapped at someone when we can’t find something. Stress can strain relationships between family members, so it’s important to keep things decluttered.

Decluttering and simplifying are about getting rid of the excess and the distractions so you have more time, space, energy and freedom for what matters most to you.