

On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.

# Talking Turkey

Hooray! For the first time in nine years my daughter has announced that she's tired of eating vegetarian "turkey" for Thanksgiving, and is ready to go whole hog for the real thing. This makes me happy.

I've always been a turkey lover, and when you load this bird full of stuffing and drippings, add the sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie, well – it's heavenly, no?

But have you ever thought about whether this, the grand kickoff to the holiday season is actually good for you? Word on the street, the nutritional street that is, is YES, if you don't let yourself get too carried away with huge portions and dense, fatty gravies.

Here's why.

Turkey is a concentrated source of high quality protein. Part of the "star quality" of turkey protein is its richness in the amino acid tryptophan – an elemental building block for our feel-good neurotransmitter serotonin. Serotonin is easily depleted by stress – which means most of us could use a lot more of it!

Benjamin Franklin thought so much of the humble turkey that he advocated for its choice as the American National Bird. Alas, we know what happened instead.

As a "white meat" turkey is naturally lower in fat than its hooved colleagues, and like chicken, it is rich in the minerals phosphorous and selenium, in addition to Vitamins B3(niacin) and B6. Phosphorous and the B



vitamins are essential to cellular health and energy while the mineral selenium is vital to several bodily processes including thyroid function, antioxidant defense, and immune competence. In fact, "accumulated evidence from prospective studies...has suggested a strong inverse correlation between selenium intake and cancer incidence," according to George Mateljan, author of [The World's Healthiest Foods](#). Sounds worth gobbling some up, doesn't it?

*If you can*, try to get the organic, or at least the free range variety. Organic will guarantee you and your family a bird that's free of growth hormones, antibiotics and other drugs. Plus you'll be sparing your family the pesticide residues from the conventionally grown grains the turkeys ate before their big sacrifice. What's more, organic and free range turkeys are both raised in a more humane environment which adds up to less stress for the turkey, and lower levels of circulating hormones for you. This itself may be part of the reason many people feel that organic turkeys are more flavorful than their conventionally raised brethren.

## About those sweet potatoes and that pumpkin pie

Sweet potatoes from the New World didn't make it over to Europe until Columbus brought them back there in 1492, when Ferdinand and Isabella finally learned what they'd been missing out on all their lives. Today, sweet potatoes today are considered one of the healthiest vegetables around, with an antioxidant resume to write home about. Not just "orange potatoes," these members of the Convolvulaceae family of vegetables are literally exploding with antioxidants beta carotene, Vitamin C and specialized "root storage proteins" that provide additional, powerful protection against oxidative stress.

As a bonus, these orange jewels have recently been classified as an "anti-diabetic" food. That's right, in animal studies the consumption of sweet potato actually helped stabilize blood sugar levels. So go ahead, you can now have your sweet potato and eat it too!

Pumpkin pie's another sweet treat with many of the same benefits as the sweet potato. It's bright orange color is a dead giveaway that it, too, is high in beta carotene. And with a whopping dose of potassium to boot, this dish is a winner, however you serve it. But to make it a virtual health food, try using xylitol, stevia, or agave nectar as your sweetener (all have a low glycemic index), and stay away from any pre-made pie shells containing trans fats (partially hydrogenated fats or oils).

### **Don't forget the cranberry sauce**

They were enjoyed by the Native Americans. They were eaten by European settlers as part of the New World holiday feast. And, they were carried on voyages by American sailors in the 18th Century to prevent scurvy. My favorite: the tart, vitamin C rich cranberry.

Why do I love them? Aside from their delicious tart and tangy taste, I love them because they are berries. And like all berries, they're fantastically healthy – rich in a special class of nutrients known as anthocyanins that sport names like epicatechin, malvidin,

and quercetin and help keep inflammation, high blood pressure and cancer at bay.

Cranberry sauce is really a superfood when you use the cranberries uncooked, thus protecting their precious nutrients and enzymes from high heat. Me, I was taught to grind them raw with hints of orange peel, the way my mother always did it (using xylitol for sweetness).

### **Happy Holiday**

Whatever you decide to include on your table, I wish you and yours a wonderful Thanksgiving meal and

holiday. Don't forget to make plenty of everything so that you'll have ample leftovers. After all, after eating that delicious and nutritious food you wouldn't want to have to stop cold turkey, would you?

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