You can make your tailgate party healthy without sacrificing fun: a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
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As the days begin to shorten, the air begins to cool, and the leaves begin to fall from the trees, many sports fans think of football games. And, what would football be without a tailgate party? However, sometimes the fun of tailgating is shadowed by the fear of how to handle all the food.

There is no reason why you can't enjoy a tailgate party; you just need to do it wisely. The key to a fun and healthy tailgate party is being adventurous with food preparation. All foods can be enjoyed in moderation.

The following are some tips for successful, healthy tailgating:

Have a nutritious snack before going to the game. Fuel up on fruit, veggies, half a sandwich, or a big glass of water or diet drink.

Prepare some light finger food to bring to the tailgate party. Try a new recipe and create something tasty and low fat.

Take a step back from the food offerings and look at everything before digging in. This may help you to decide what foods you truly want to have. Take only the foods you will enjoy the most.
Think through your strategy. Try a half portion, have the burger without cheese, and try munching on pretzels instead of chips.

Take a seat! Instead of standing while eating, take a plate, sit down, and enjoy.

Have a drink on hand, such as water or diet soda. Liquids fill you up at a low cost to your calorie budget for the day.

Keep your mouth busy! Have some breath mints, gum, or sugar-free candy to decrease your need to eat more.

Balance is the key. No food is good or bad. All foods fit into your nutrition plan if you make sensible choices.

Remember that the first priority for the party is the event and the fellowship -- not the food.

The No. 1 tailgate tip — be happy with your choices and enjoy!

In addition, you can take the chill off of a cool day and make chili using the leanest ground beef or ground turkey, including a variety of beans for color and nutrition. And, to satisfy hearty appetites, make a barbecue using skinned turkey or chicken breasts and a bottle of low-fat barbecue sauce.

For vegetarians, try grilling mushrooms, zucchini, sliced onions, and peppers. Marinating the vegetables in fat-free Italian dressing before grilling will add extra flavor. Other suggestions include preparing a veggie tray with low-fat or fat-free dip, or filling a basket with seasonal apples, grapes and pears. Crunchy snacks such as pretzels and baked chips are also always a good, low-fat choice.

If you are still hungry, you can top it off with healthy desserts. For instance, fruit kabobs with a fat-free frozen topping and pureed berries is a satisfying and healthy choice. Or, in place of butter or margarine, use applesauce (the no sugar added variety) when making your favorite brownies or cookies.

While preparing your tailgating food, you should be mindful of the following food safety tips:

Before, during, and after preparing your food, make sure you wash your hands, lathering them with warm soap and water for a full 20 seconds.

Include moist towelettes for guests to use or a hand sanitizer.

Be sure to pack meats in a sealed plastic bag to keep juices from contaminating other foods.

Keep two separate insulated coolers: one for drinks and one for foods. This will keep your foods chilled until you are ready to cook or serve them, especially with guests utilizing the drink cooler more frequently.

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Pack foods in reverse order, so that the last ones packed will be the first ones used.

Include a thermometer if you are cooking raw meats, and be sure to cook to the proper temperature.

Toss all refrigerated foods that have been unrefrigerated for more than two hours. If the temperature is above 90 degrees Fahrenheit, toss them after one hour.

If you’re sensible and include a variety of nutritious foods at your tailgate party, while incorporating smart food safety practices, you can’t go wrong.

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