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Militarism in Defense of a Stable Weight Is No Vice

You could be forgiven for going into the holiday season as if it were a military campaign: Beat the holiday battle of the bulge! Fight holiday weight gain! Win the war against holiday pounds! Survive the stress of the holidays! Those are the kinds of messages we hear.

I'm kind of a pacifist when it comes to both the holidays and managing weight: Neither should be painful or destructive, and both should, I think, be approached with a sense of humor and goodwill. But planning for a weight-control campaign at this time of the year has some merit. After all, come January, we want to be on the winning side, right?

So, now that you've survived the opening feast, let the real challenge begin!

Like Holiday Challenges past, this one has a simple goal: to maintain your weight between now and New Year's.

According to registered dietitian Christine Palumbo, a spokeswoman for Shady Brook Farms turkey products, most people gain a modest 1.06 pounds over the holidays. That doesn't sound like much. But most of us never shed that extra pound, so after 10 years we've gained almost 11 pounds.

Avoiding that single pound is the chief aim of this operation.

Now let's talk strategy, based on tips I've put together from Palumbo and Arthur Frank, medical director of the George Washington University Weight Management Program.

Devise a Battle Plan

Start by looking at your calendar and identifying all the parties, dinners, events at your kids' schools, cookie swaps, shopping trips and other places and occasions where you know you'll be

challenged. Event by event, decide how you're going to meet those challenges.

■ Before the office party, eat a snack (perhaps a turkey sandwich on whole-grain bread with a piece of fruit) so you won't be ravenous when you get there, Palumbo suggests. Then hold yourself to just two glasses of wine, switching to sparkling water in between. Frank reminds us that "free food is not really free." It certainly costs calories.

■ At the cookie swap, taste only the most delicious-looking treat and package all the rest to take home, where you'll repack them in gift tins and split them among friends.

■ At a dinner, Palumbo suggests, sit next to the person you believe will be the slowest eater. You'll find yourself mimicking that leisurely pace and better recognize when you're full. Frank adds, "Don't eat standing up," which prevents your paying proper attention to your food.

■ Before any special event, bank calories, Frank advises. Cut back a bit for a day or so beforehand to make room for Mom's wonderful mashed potatoes or Dad's special eggnog.

■ Decide when and how often to weigh yourself: once a week on Monday morning or daily weigh-ins. As Frank says, "Daily weights compel your attention to the problem, and, sadly, you do need to pay attention."

Know Your Enemies

Identify foods and situations that trigger your overeating. If you're not safe alone in a room with a honey-baked ham, can you take just one slice on your plate and fill the rest up with vegetables? If talking to your difficult sister makes you want to eat a whole bag of gumdrops, try to minimize



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the time you spend with her — and keep those tempting gumdrops out of the house.

Embrace Your Allies

Make a list of fun activities that distract you from eating. How about breaking out the Wii for a game of tennis? Like to knit? When others in your office are snacking, get those needles clacking. Palumbo's great party suggestion: Assume the role of photographer, making sure you get good shots of everyone. "You can't be eating high-fat foods at the same time," she says.

Enlist a Friend

Find someone to join you in the Challenge, and plan to touch base with that partner every day for pep talks and support.

Arm Yourself

Avail yourself of a variety of tools to keep

track of your progress:

- A daily activity log.
- A body mass calculator.
- Keeping a food diary is a great way to track exactly what you put in your mouth and when; try the one from the National Institutes of Health, found by going to www.nhlbi.nih.gov and searching for "food diary."

Combat Stress

Since stress can lead to overeating and comfort eating, keep it under control with a few minutes of exercise, preferably outdoors in the fresh air; or make time for a yoga class.

Hold Your Ground

Your mother-in-law may want to see you eat up her big holiday meal, but only you are in charge of what you put in your

mouth. Same goes for the booze, Frank adds: Nobody is going to notice how much you are, or aren't, drinking.

Surrender With Honor

Despite all your planning, you're bound to slip up now and again. If you do indulge in too much fudge, at least make sure you enjoy every bite. Then go back, review the plans and start over. "People who have lost weight and maintained successfully for long periods have something in common," Frank says. "They're not perfect, but they recover quickly."

Plan for Ambushes

Even the most carefully laid plans can't cover all eventualities. Surprise! Your aunt shipped you a gourmet fruitcake, which arrives just as you get home — ravenous — from work. What are you going to do? Tear into it and eat three slices before you take off your coat? Or take that cake straight to the freezer and bury it in the back? Plan ambush strategies before you're ambushed.

Have a Bit of L'Esprit de Corps

Every Tuesday from now through early January, the Post's Checkup blog will be devoted to the Holiday Challenge. Write a comment to let us know how you're coming along; share your tips, challenges and recipes.

Check out today's Checkup blog, in which Jennifer fields comments and ideas about the Holiday Challenge. Sign up for our weekly Lean & Fit newsletter by going to www.washingtonpost.com and searching for "newsletters." And e-mail your thoughts to Jennifer at checkup@washpost.com.