

Delights made healthy

It is possible to indulge without guilt during the Deepavali celebration, writes **Meera Murugesan**

EVERYDAY Indian food is generally healthy and balanced. But with celebrations such as Deepavali, festive foods make their appearance and, by tradition, they tend to be richer, use luxurious (read: fattening) ingredients and by extension, are high in calories.

Festive food is meant to tempt the palate and excite the senses, but how do we ensure it doesn't do too much damage to the waistline?

International Medical University (IMU) nutrition and dietetics lecturer Dr Kanimolli Arasu says it is possible to create healthy Deepavali menus.

The first step is to reduce the use of ghee in traditional recipes by replacing it with vegetable oil and removing fat from mutton and skin from chicken before cooking.

Also, swap coconut milk in gravies with low-fat milk. You can also use half a cup of coconut milk with half a cup of low-fat milk

to retain the taste and aroma of dishes like sothi (Indian coconut milk-based gravy) and fish moilee. Another key step is to reduce deep frying.

"Papadoms, for example, can be microwaved instead of deep-fried and fried chicken can be replaced with chicken peratal (dry curry) or a chicken curry for a healthier alternative," says Kanimolli.

Cream in North Indian dishes like butter chicken and paneer butter masala can be replaced with curd or low-fat milk. The amount of butter or ghee spread on top of parathas can also be reduced.

MAKE THE SWITCH

Similarly, offer your guests nutritious and healthy chapatis instead of deep-fried poori if they show up for breakfast on Deepavali day. A vegetable rice pilaf can be served instead of ghee rice during lunch.

Deepavali is also the time to savour Indian sweets or "mithai", which generally make liberal use of sugar, ghee and full-cream milk.

Kanimolli says we can enjoy sweets in a better way for our bodies by reducing the sugar content in traditional fare such as laddoo and ghee urundai (ghee balls). Use half the sugar from the original recipe or opt for natural sweetening substances such



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as raisins, cherries or dried apricots.

"Some Indian sweet recipes naturally contain less sugar and higher fibre than others and we can opt for these. For example, apple halwa, coconut and nuts burfi or ragi halwa compared with wheat halwa and laddoo," says Kanimolli.

All sugars (honey, jaggery, brown sugar, white sugar) contain little nutrients and are high in calories and thus, detrimental to health if taken in large

amounts.

Kanimolli says we must recognise that some of our favourite sweets contain high amounts of sugar and fat and either reduce the portion or use healthier substitutes.

For example, instead of eating three pieces of thosai with gravy, a laddoo and a sweet beverage, take the same amount of food but swap the sweet beverage for plain water. It's all about making wise substitutes, stresses Kanimolli.

For the carbohydrate part of a Deepavali meal, rice, thosai and idli tend to be favourites. Kanimolli says portion control is key.

This is especially important for individuals with diabetes as excessive carbohydrate intake increases blood sugar levels.

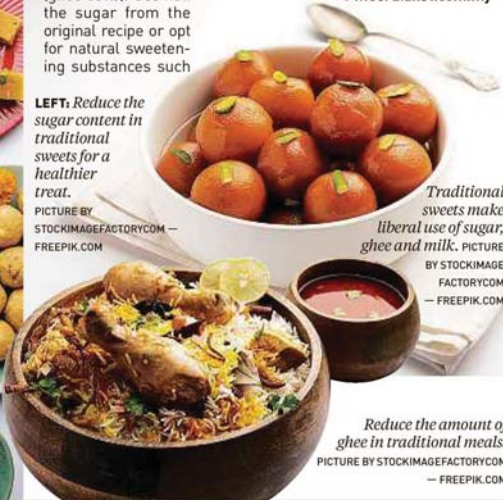
Besides heart disease, many Malaysian Indians have diabetes too.

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LEFT: Reduce the sugar content in traditional sweets for a healthier treat.

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Traditional sweets make liberal use of sugar, ghee and milk. PICTURE BY STOCKIMAGEFACTORY.COM — FREEPIK.COM

Reduce the amount of ghee in traditional meals. PICTURE BY STOCKIMAGEFACTORY.COM — FREEPIK.COM



Savour traditional delicacies moderately. PICTURE BY STOCKIMAGEFACTORY.COM — FREEPIK.COM

BELOW: Opt for curries instead of deep-fried meat or seafood.

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DO IT RIGHT

FESTIVITIES are a time for feasting, especially with a string of open houses to attend. Here are some tips to keep your health and weight in check.

- Opt for low-calorie foods such as idli instead of poori.
- Limit the intake of fried foods, such as muruku, and sweets, such as laddoo, ghee urundai or kadalai urundai.
- Reduce the intake of carbonated drinks and fruit cordials.
- Choose fresh fruit as your dessert instead of sweets.
- Eat in small quantities or reduce the serving size of your meals.
- Schedule additional physical activity whenever you go for open houses.

EAT LIKE YOUR ANCESTORS

TRADITIONAL Indian food is generally made with the least amount of processed food. It's predominantly rice- or wheat-based ingredients with rich use of spices, lentils, beans and dairy products.

The traditional Indian diet incorporates elements of Ayurveda; the diet involves personalised recommendations on eating or restricting certain food based on one's body type.

Ayurvedic principles advocate consumption of foods from multiple food categories.

A unique feature of the traditional Indian diet is the inclusion of many types of legumes and pulses that are rich in protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals.

Kanimolli says traditional South Indian meals such as idli, thosai, khichdi and sambar are full of grains, which are nutritionally rich products. The fermentation in preparing the idli and thosai batter improves the nutritional and protein efficiency value of these meals.

The batter also contains a good amount of gut-friendly bacteria (probiotics). Idli is not only a protein-rich food but also highly digestible due to the fermentation.

"Any food can fit into a healthy category as long as it's taken in the right portion and right combination."

Even though idli and thosai are considered low-fat, high-fibre foods, they can be detrimental to health if taken with high-calorie, fat-laden gravies.

So watch out for the side dishes accompanying these meals. Opt for dhal or vegetable gravies and vegetable chutneys instead of coconut chutney.