

The leaves have fallen, the gardens are put to bed, and the firewood has been brought in. As the temperatures begin to fall and we await the first snow, Thanksgiving has arrived. As we sit down to enjoy the good company of friends and family, we all look forward to our holiday meal. So let's talk turkey.

Most people enjoy a traditional Thanksgiving dinner of turkey and all the fixings. Traditionally this meal will include plenty of carbohydrates in the form of root vegetables, breads, and pies as well as plenty of turkey.

Why is it that people get so sleepy after eating Thanksgiving dinner? Some people believe it is because of the L-tryptophan in the turkey. L-tryptophan is an essential amino acid. In other words, it is a nutrient necessary for life, which our body cannot synthesize on its own.

The theory behind the L-tryptophan's role in the post-dinner sleepiness lies in its role in the manufacture of a neurotransmitter called serotonin. Our bodies convert L-tryptophan into niacin – a B-vitamin. Niacin is a precursor to the neurotransmitter serotonin. Serotonin has a calming effect on the nervous system and plays a role in sleep. Serotonin also has a beneficial effect in depression.

This relationship between L-tryptophan, serotonin, and depression is why L-tryptophan was once used to treat insomnia and a form of depression called Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD. However, in 1989 the FDA banned the import of L-tryptophan when it was linked to more than 1500 cases of eosinophilia-myalgia syndrome (EMS), a serious connective tissue disorder. 95% of these cases were linked to a contamination problem from one Japanese manufacturer. Therefore, you must get this amino acid in your food.

L-tryptophan works best on an empty stomach. So while L-tryptophan may make you sleepy, the amount of L-tryptophan in a serving of turkey eaten at a meal is probably not enough to be the sole cause of the post-Thanksgiving dinner nap. Rather, the likely culprit is the high carbohydrate meal, fat, and alcohol you'll ingest.

The average Thanksgiving meal contains approximately 3000 calories and 229 grams of fat. That is way in excess of the total caloric intake necessary on a daily basis. All this food causes your body to work harder to digest. Add to that the sedating effect of the carbohydrates and any alcohol consumed and you're feeling ready for a nap.

According to the Mayo Clinic, it will take a 140 – 150 pound person almost 6 hours of jogging at 5 mph, over 6.5 hours of riding a stationary bike, or over 12 hours of walking at 3.5 miles per hour to burn off those 3000 calories.

So how do we enjoy this holiday, which is based around the meal and not consume all these calories?

The easy answer is to just eat less. But the truth is that we all know most people overeat during the holidays despite their best intentions to do otherwise. So with this in mind you should just make the healthiest choices you can.

This starts with knowing the basic information about the foods you will eat. With that in mind, the following chart lists some common foods and the fat, carbohydrates, and calories for each.

	Calories	Carbs	Fat
White Turkey – 1 cup	220	0	5
Dark Turkey – 1 cup	262	0	10
Mashed Potato – 1 cup	237	9	5
Sweet Potato– 1 cup	180	41	0
Green Beans – 1 cup	44	10	0
Carrots – 1 cup	55	13	0
Turnip – 1 cup	34	5	0
Butter – 1 tbsp	102	0	12
Butternut Squash – 1 cup	82	0	22
Stuffing – 1 cup	356	43	17
Cranberry Sauce – 1 cup	418	108	0
Dinner Rolls - 1	84	14	2
Pumpkin Pie – 1 piece	316	41	14
Apple Pie – 1 piece	411	58	19
Pecan Pie – 1 piece	503	64	27
Red Wine 3.5 oz	74	2	0
White Wine 3.5 oz	70	1	0
Beer 12 oz	139	11	0

Keep in mind that this list does not include all the side dishes people commonly serve at Thanksgiving. With the exception of mashed potatoes, it also does not take into account any butter that may be added at the table. It is also important to realize that this is just one meal, not the entire day.

One should enjoy the holiday and the company of good friends and family. However, it is possible to do so without eating excessively. Choosing one cup of carrots rather than one cup of mashed potatoes will save you 193 calories. This translates into 22 minutes of jogging at 5 mph.

To calculate the calories burned during other exercise types go to <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/exercise/SM00109> . For more food content information go to <http://www.myfitnesspal.com/food/calorie-chart-nutrition-facts> .

I hope you enjoy your holiday more in the knowledge that healthy decision need not be a sacrifice.

Dr. Leo Kenney is a board certified chiropractic orthopedist who has been serving the North Conway area since 1984 at the North Conway Chiropractic Center. He is on the postgraduate faculty of the National University of Health Sciences and is the founder and CEO of Professional Training Solutions, Inc. He teaches seminars across the country occupational health testing. Dr. Kenney is currently chairman of the New Hampshire Board of Chiropractic Examiners. You may visit his website at www.drleokenney.com .