Is turkey healthful? K-State nutritionist says yes

But the way we cook it may affect just how beneficial it is to our bodies

MANHATTAN, Kan. – There’s no doubt that the bird is the star of the show at most family holiday dinners, so it’s fair to wonder whether all the turkey talk this time of year is going to be good for the waistline.

To that, Kansas State University nutrition specialist Sandy Procter says, well…it depends.

“Turkey has a lot of basically healthful qualities,” Procter said, “but what we do to prepare it can either help to maintain that healthy name tag, or it can completely change its complexion.”

In other words, basting, brining and frying may be inviting extra fat or sodium to an otherwise healthy meal.

In the United States, “we definitely have embraced the idea of eating turkey,” Procter said. “We eat about twice as much as we were eating 50 years ago because we’ve learned about the positive things it can do for our health.”

Data from 2019 indicate that Americans eat about 16 pounds of turkey per person each year, or about 5.3 billion pounds of turkey combined.

“It’s a great source of protein, and our bodies need protein to build and repair bones, muscles, cartilage, skin, blood and tissue,” Procter said.

She added that roasted turkey is low in fat, with white meat lower in fat compared to dark meat. Most fat in poultry is located right under the skin.

“Turkey is also a good source of beneficial vitamins and minerals,” Procter said, including magnesium, niacin, iron, choline, phosphorus, potassium, B12 and zinc.

She added that turkey is an “excellent source of selenium,” a trace element that helps the body make antioxidant enzymes. “Some studies have shown that a diet rich in selenium can help to prevent certain types of cancers, including bladder, breast and lung cancer,” she said.
Turkey and other types of poultry are considered part of what is commonly called the MIND diet, named for its association with the Mediterranean and DASH diets, and thought to be beneficial to the brain.

“Poultry as a regular part of our eating patterns may help to slow mental decline associated with Alzheimer’s disease and other causes of dementia,” Procter said. “(Researchers) recommend eating poultry products about twice a week, especially for older adults. It’s not the entire solution, but it may be part of the answer that we can address through healthier eating.”

There is also the fact that eating a turkey dinner seems to make you want a nap.

“It’s true that turkey contains tryptophan, an amino acid that has this property that can help you have better sleep,” Procter said. “I think for most of us, the sheer volume of what we eat as part of the turkey dinner is also what makes us sleepy.”

“I’m not sure it can all be attributed to the tryptophan in the turkey.”

In any case, a serving of common sense with the turkey dinner – including controlling portion sizes – is a good idea if you’re concerned about gaining weight this holiday season. Procter said adding a brisk walk after dinner instead of extra pie is another healthy idea.

“Holiday foods themselves are not the real problem,” she said. “In many cases, it’s how much we eat, how often we over-eat and how active we choose to be over the holidays that tend to affect our weight.”

More information about healthy eating during the holidays and year-round is available online from K-State’s Department of Food, Nutrition, Dietetics and Health. Information may also be available at local extension offices in Kansas.

-30-

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K-State Department of Food, Nutrition, Dietetics and Health, www.hhs.k-state.edu/fndh

K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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