Some fat in our diet is necessary for proper body function. Fat gives us energy, helps absorb some vitamins, builds hormones, cushions body organs and helps maintain body temperature.

The trick is to eat the right types of fat in moderation. But during the holidays, it can be difficult to do this, since many of the foods served at this time of year are generally high in calories and fat.

There are some simple techniques and substitutions that can help decrease unhealthy fats in our diet.

For starters, cook with vegetable oil instead of solid fats such as butter. Choose canola or olive oil as they are monounsaturated fats. Studies show that eating foods rich in monounsaturated fats improves blood cholesterol levels, which can decrease your risk of heart disease. Research also shows that these fats may benefit insulin levels and blood sugar control, which can be especially helpful if you have type 2 diabetes.

You can also sauté vegetables in reduced-sodium chicken or vegetable broth instead of butter.

Choose lean cuts of beef and pork (lean ground beef or pork tenderloin) instead of fatty meats. Trim visible fat from meat before cooking, then drain grease from meat after cooking.

You can also replace meat in your diet with fish. We eat lots of fish here in Alaska and gain all those great omega-3 fatty acids that protect the heart. When you eat chicken and turkey, do so without the skin. You generally get a better product by leaving the skin on when cooking, and then pulling it off before serving. The poultry will be slightly higher in fat than if it was cooked without the skin, but the moistness is well worth it.

Choose low-fat or nonfat dairy instead of whole-fat milk, yogurt and cheese. Switch from
regular sour cream, cream cheese, cheese and mayonnaise to reduced fat versions. Use nonfat plain yogurt instead of sour cream in recipes.

This time of year we eat lots of creamy dips. I make yogurt cheese to use in my favorite dip recipes. Place a paper coffee filter in a colander. Spoon nonfat plain yogurt into the filter and allow it to drain for 24 hours in the refrigerator. Use this yogurt cheese as you would sour cream. Be sure to save the whey that drains out; it is a great source of protein. It can be a great addition to your breakfast smoothies, or it can be used in your homemade bread instead of using water or milk.

Serve plenty of raw vegetables to accompany your dips. Just serving vegetables instead of chips will reduce the fat and salt you consume. One half cup of fresh vegetables is about 50 calories. Ten potato chips have 100 calories. Enough said.

In recipes, you can replace one whole egg with two egg whites.

Decrease fat by one-third in recipes. I make a large batch of cookies by tripling everything else in the standard recipe, but only double the fat. No complaints at my house.

It is also a good idea to read ingredient lists on food labels to avoid foods that contain partially hydrogenated oils and tropical oils (coconut, palm, etc.).

You can also bake with fat substitutes. I usually reduce the fat by half and replace with equal amounts of unsweetened applesauce, mashed bananas, pureed prunes, pureed pumpkin, grated zucchini or nonfat yogurt.

When it comes to desserts, consider serving fruits instead of fat-laden baked goods. Make a fruit crisp (pie filling with a crumble topping) instead of a pie. Poach or bake seasonal fruits such as apples or pears. At our house, I poach pears in cranberry puree or juice. Or, core apples and fill them with a little brown sugar, cinnamon and raisins. Bake them right alongside the turkey. Top the dessert with low-fat or fat-free frozen yogurt or whip (instead of ice cream) and you have a great dessert with less fat.

You don’t have to throw your diet out the window during the holidays. Just choose wisely and still enjoy yourself.

**Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with**