



“Making Holiday Meal Safer for those with Swallowing Difficulties. ”

By: Laura Michael

Gathering at the holiday table is one way we share our love, show our humanity and honor our cultural traditions. For many of us, holiday feasts like Thanksgiving and Christmas don't feel like a holiday without certain well known and loved dishes. Traditional foods and recipes are handed down from one generation to the next, keeping alive our memories and honoring those no longer at the table.

For most of us, feasting with friends and family is basic to our humanity. But when you are having trouble swallowing, the act of eating can be scary, difficult or even dangerous. Needing to be conscious of every bite you take, how you position your head and thinking through the swallow is no picnic! It can create anxiety, prevent you from being in the moment, taking part in the conversation at the table and enjoying the occasion like everyone else. Those who are recovering from a stroke, are having treatment for cancer or who are living with dementia may already feel isolated. Not being able to share traditional family meals in a “natural” manner may be frustrating and challenging and can make matters worse.

It is understandable when those with swallowing problems may be tempted to “cheat” during the holidays and eat foods that are not part of their eating plan. Sharing traditional foods with family and friends is how we celebrate! Platters get passed and everyone takes a little bit of this and maybe a whole lot of that. Traditional foods have a special place at the holiday table but if those foods are the wrong texture, they can be a problem for someone who is at risk for aspiration. Aspiration is when a small particle of food or liquid enters the trachea (a.k.a. the airway or windpipe). Aspiration can cause choking and aspiration pneumonia, both of which can be life-threatening.

Whether your family celebrates a holiday dinner with roast beef, turkey or ham, it is possible for someone with dysphagia to eat almost everything on the dinner table with a few modifications.

If you are on an IDDSI Level 5 or 6 –*Minced & Moist* or *Soft & Bite-Sized* - remember to take small bites of soft, well-cooked foods. Add gravy and sauces to your foods to make them moister and easier to chew and swallow. Dark meat turkey is often more moist and tender so choose thigh meat and cut it into small pieces. Be mindful when eating foods with mixed textures. Avoid foods that aren't easy to chew like nuts and raw vegetables. Stick with roasted vegetables and stay away from the crudité plate. Have the pumpkin pie instead of the pecan pie.

If you have prescribed an IDDSI Level 4 - *Puree Diet*, you'll need to make a few additional modifications to many foods to make them the right texture for you. To puree a single serving or two, you will find that a powerful mini food processor will become an invaluable tool. Full-size food processors and blenders won't work because they are too big to efficiently puree one or two portions to the correct texture. You will also need an instant food thickener like ThickenUp Clear® or ThickIt®.

Here is a puree plan for most traditional foods:

Roasted Turkey/Beef/Ham/Brisket

- ✓ In a mini food processor, place cooked a 2 – 3 oz. portion of cooked meat and process until finely chopped. Add 2 tablespoons of broth and process again until very finely chopped. Add 1 scoop instant food thickener and puree until smooth. The texture should be as thick as mashed potatoes. For visual appeal, place the meat in the corner of a quart-size zip-top bag and seal. Snip off the corner with the meat, and pipe the puree onto a plate in the approximate shape and size of a serving of meat.

Mashed Potatoes & Gravy

- ✓ No modifications needed, just make sure the potatoes and gravy are lump-free and the potatoes are firm (not soupy).

Stuffing

- ✓ Avoid stuffing. Try slurried dinner rolls (below) which taste a lot like stuffing.

Sweet Potatoes

- ✓ Mash with lots of butter.

Green Bean Casserole

- ✓ No mushroom soup allowed. Instead, puree a portion of well-cooked green beans and fried onions in a mini food processor with a small amount of cooking liquid. Add 1 scoop of Instant Food Thickener (I like ThickenUp Clear) and blend until smooth. You are looking for a texture like smooth mashed potatoes.

Dinner rolls

- ✓ Use only soft dinner rolls. NO SEEDS OR WHOLE GRAINS! Make a slurry with ¼ cup of chicken broth and ½ scoop of Instant Food Thickener (ThickenUp Clear) and mix until it thickens. Pull apart the roll and cover with the slurry. Set aside for about ten minutes, until the roll has absorbed the slurry. Reheat as needed.

Cranberry Sauce

- ✓ Canned smooth, jellied sauce is okay.

Pumpkin Pie

- ✓ Filling only. No crust.

Apple Pie

- ✓ Puree the filling in a mini food processor. No crust.
If you crave apple pie a la mode, check-out the recipe on my blog:
www.dysphagiasolutions.wordpress.com.

With a few modifications, you or someone you love can safely enjoy a holiday feast!

Laura Michael is the owner of Dysphagia Solutions, the author of “Making Every Bite Count – Cooking for Someone with Swallowing Problems” and a board member of the National Foundation of Swallowing Disorders. For more information, contact Laura at 480-266-5622 or LEM.DSD@gmail.com