

Holiday time means cookie time

Expert tips on safely preparing, baking and storing treats for the holidays



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MANHATTAN, Kan. – In the next few weeks, they will seemingly be everywhere—in homes, at offices and at parties. They come in several varieties, and most people can probably name a favorite when it comes to holiday cookies.

According to two [Kansas State University](#) experts, cookies can and should be enjoyed in moderation this holiday season. The experts provide tips to prepare, bake and store cookies safely, and offer advice on how people can alter ingredients to make cookie recipes a bit more healthful.

A more nutritious cookie

Sandy Procter, a nutrition specialist for K-State Research and Extension and a registered dietitian, said while cooking is often considered an art, which means people can “ebb and flow” with measuring to get the taste just right, baking is a science that takes careful measurement and awareness of ingredients to come up with the perfect cookie, cake or other baked product.

Still, substitutions in baking recipes are possible to add fiber to the product, for example, or to make a product contain less fat and calories. A simple way to add fiber is to take out half of the all-purpose flour for which a recipe calls, and replace it with whole-wheat flour, said Karen Blakeslee, a K-State Research and Extension food scientist.

“You may have to add more moisture, because whole-wheat flour tends to dry up the dough a bit,” Blakeslee said.

If the recipe calls for a dairy product, Blakeslee said instead of a full-fat product, try a low-fat, or in some cases, a nonfat product. Sometimes, however, nonfat options don’t work well, because the recipe needs some fat to work: case in point, frosting.

“If it’s a cream cheese frosting, nonfat cream cheese often doesn’t work,” she said. “It makes a soft frosting that never sets up.”

Procter added that cookie recipes can often be adjusted by replacing half of the fat ingredients, such as butter or shortening, with applesauce. Depending on the type of cookie, it can make for a different texture that can be desirable, such as making the cookie chewier.

What about the add-ins, such as chocolate chips? Instead of milk chocolate chips, use dark chocolate, the experts suggested, which can have a bolder, richer flavor and may require less use in the recipe.

“Dried fruits are an easy addition to a lot of recipes, even if the recipe doesn’t call for them,” Blakeslee said. “Add a dried fruit that compliments the other flavors. Replacing some of the chocolate chips with dried fruit, such as dried cranberries, raisins or even dried apricots, just to change it up a bit, adds a different color to the cookie, too.”

Oatmeal and other boxed cereals can add crunch to cookies without extra calories, Procter said.

“A crisp rice cereal, for example, can make an interesting texture and stretch out the sweet and fat parts of the dough, so you have a slightly lower-calorie recipe,” Procter said.

Blakeslee said for those people who wish to reduce the cholesterol and fat content of their cookies, there is a way to substitute eggs in recipes.

“One egg substitution I’ve tried with muffins is using one tablespoon of ground flaxseed and three tablespoons of water to rehydrate the flaxseed, and that replaces one egg,” Blakeslee said. “You also get the bonus of a healthy fat and a little extra fiber into your product.”

Portion control

If people want to follow the recipe as-is without making substitutions, that’s perfectly fine also, Procter said. This is a special time of year to enjoy good cookies, but be sure to watch your portion sizes.

“All foods fit in moderation,” Procter said. “Enjoy that sugar cookie that melts in your mouth. Maybe it does that because it’s not of the ingredients you eat all of the time.”

Try not to make a habit out of having the cookies just sitting out to grab at all times, the experts said. Portion them out, and consider freezing them in plastic freezer bags or containers to eat later as a tactic to lessen the amount of cookies eaten in one day.

If at a holiday party, consider other options to eat with the cookies, Procter said: “Keep portion size under control, and keep the plate ‘not totally cookie.’ Fill it with other healthful options, such as fruits and vegetables.”

Baking tips and safety

Always wash hands before, during and after baking and cooking, Blakeslee said. Wash utensils as well. When handling raw materials, such as eggs, this is an important step in baking safety and prevents cross-contamination of pathogens that could lead to foodborne illness.

“I don’t make many friends when I say this, but we shouldn’t be tasting the cookie dough either because of the raw eggs,” Blakeslee added. “Raw eggs could contain salmonella. Resist the temptation to taste the dough. Wait until those cookies are done, and enjoy them that way.”

When preparing the recipe, measuring correctly is also important. For instance, stir the flour, scoop it into measuring cups and level it off.

“That way, you are measuring your ingredients accurately,” Blakeslee said. “If you dip your measuring cup into the flour sack, shake it out and tap it on the table, you’re going to have too much flour or maybe not enough flour in some cases.”

Preheat the oven at least 30 minutes before baking, the experts recommended, to ensure it completely heats up to the recommended temperature. For most recipes, it’s best to start the oven when beginning to mix the ingredients. Also, be sure to place oven racks in the center to bake the cookies properly and with the right amount of air circulation.

Convection ovens bake faster and hotter than standard ovens, Blakeslee said, so be sure to turn down the temperature dial about 25 degrees Fahrenheit from what the recipe recommends. If using frozen cookie dough, consider turning standard ovens down 25 F from the recipe recommendation, just to allow the dough to bake properly. Realize it could take cookies a couple of minutes longer to bake when using frozen dough.

An oven thermometer could help in adjusting the temperature properly, Blakeslee added. Don’t always rely on the oven’s external dial.

For cookie sheets, one cookie sheet is not necessarily better than another, but the experts advise bakers to know how cookies work with a particular cookie sheet and oven.

“Dark pans tend to bake a little hotter, and they’ll make the bottoms of your cookies a little darker because of that dark surface,” Blakeslee said. “Shiny pans tend to reflect heat off of your cookies, so they will be a lighter brown color.”

Therefore, for dark and ceramic stone pans that tend to hold more heat, try turning down the oven temperature 25 F. Realize that cookies could spread more quickly in between batches, as these pans don’t cool down as quickly.

Procter said using parchment paper on cookie sheets, particularly the dark sheets, not only speeds up the cleaning afterwards, but it also helps the bottoms of cookies look nice and uniform for holiday guests to enjoy.

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