



# DECEMBER 2024

## Is Safe Toys and Gifts Awareness Month

Now's the time to gather with loved ones, eat comfort food and share thoughtful gifts. Unfortunately, sometimes even the most well-intentioned gifts can come with unforeseen risks.

December is Safe Toys and Gifts Awareness Month. When holiday shopping, it's important to think about a gift before giving it. One of the biggest risks during this time of year is giving young children toys with potentially dangerous components, such as small parts that can be swallowed. Tips for selecting appropriate toys include checking labels for age ranges; avoiding toys with small parts that can injure, be swallowed or cause blindness; and ensuring toys are labeled as nontoxic. Additionally, if you intend to gift sporting equipment or similar gear, it's also important to provide protective gear, such as helmets and knee pads.

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Live Well,  
Work Well



December 2024

## Prioritizing Your Emotional Well-being During the Holidays



While the holiday season and end-of-year festivities can be fun, they can also be stressful and take a toll on your emotional well-being. Putting your emotional wellness on the backburner may cause mood changes and feelings of irritability, hopelessness and isolation.

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**An American Psychological Association poll revealed that nearly 9 out of 10 Americans anticipate excessive stress during the holidays.**

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Consider the following tips to help prioritize your emotional well-being during the holiday season:

- **Practice healthy habits.** Maintaining a consistent sleep schedule and eating a balanced diet will help ensure you have enough physical and mental energy to tackle responsibilities and challenges.
- **Stick to a routine.** It's important to keep a daily schedule for both work and personal time. Checking items off your to-do list can also help you feel accomplished on a daily basis.
- **Decrease caffeine and alcohol use.** Although alcohol and caffeine often appear at celebrations, these substances can provoke feelings of depression, anxiety or other mental health challenges.
- **Maintain your boundaries.** Your calendar may quickly fill up with work, personal and social events. Get comfortable saying "no" and reducing extra activities or tasks so you aren't overloaded.
- **Incorporate positive activities.** Get into the habit of taking care of yourself and doing activities that make you happy. During a fast-paced month, it's vital to slow down and prioritize self-care.
- **Recognize your holiday stress triggers and relievers.** Financial pressures and personal demands are common triggers. Stress may cause you to lean on harmful stress relievers and fall into unhealthy habits like smoking or drinking. Becoming aware of your triggers and unhealthy coping mechanisms allows you to prepare healthy strategies to reduce stress.

It's essential to stay in tune with your feelings and care for yourself. If you have concerns about your emotional well-being, contact a mental health professional or call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Helpline at 800-662-HELP (4357).

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## Giving Your Favorite Recipes a Healthy Makeover

Food is part of holiday traditions, and your family may look forward to certain recipes. Luckily, there are some ways to make your favorite recipes a bit healthier. Consider these ways to transform your holiday recipes:

- **Fat**—When baking, use half the butter or oil and replace the other half with unsweetened applesauce, mashed banana or Greek yogurt.

- **Salt**—Gradually cut back the salt to see if you can taste the difference. You can reduce salt by half if baked goods don't require yeast.
- **Sugar**—Reduce the amount of sugar by one-third to one-half. Instead, add spices like cinnamon, cloves, allspice and nutmeg, or vanilla or almond extract to boost sweetness.

Healthy swaps can also increase the nutritional value of your classics. Get creative and experiment with other ways of creating healthy recipes for your most beloved holiday traditions.

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## Sugar Substitutes

- **Stevia**—Swap out 1 cup of sugar for 1 teaspoon of stevia.
  - **Honey**—Add in a quarter of the amount of sugar listed.
  - **Coconut sugar**—Use an unrefined sugar cup for cup.
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## Poor Sleep in Your 40s Can Accelerate Brain Aging

Sleep is good for your overall health, and new research focuses on how it's important for brain health too. Researchers from the University of California San Francisco and other institutions found that sleep deprivation can make the brain age faster. The study revealed that people in their 40s with poor sleep quality have a brain age that's 1.6 to 2.6 years older by the time they're in their 50s, compared to those who consistently get quality sleep.

To combat this, focus on building healthy sleep habits. Try to fall asleep and wake up at the same time every day, aiming to get at least seven hours of sleep. Cultivate a quality sleep environment by keeping the room cool, dark and quiet and avoiding devices before bed. If you have concerns about your sleep habits, talk to a doctor.

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## Applesauce Cookies

Makes: 12 servings

### Ingredients

- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup margarine (or butter or shortening)
- 1 egg
- 2 tsp. baking soda
- 2 ½ cups all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- 1 ½ cups unsweetened applesauce
- 1 cup raisins
- 1 cup nuts (optional)

### Preparations

1. Preheat oven to 350 F. Grease the cookie sheet.
2. Cream together the sugar, margarine and egg.
3. In a separate bowl, combine the baking soda, flour, salt and cinnamon. Mix well.
4. Stir the flour mixture into the margarine mixture just until moist.
5. Add the applesauce, raisins and nuts (if using).
6. Drop dough by a heaping teaspoon several inches apart on a greased baking sheet. Bake for 10 to 12 minutes.

### Nutritional Information (per serving)

- Total calories: 282

- Total fat: 8 g
- Protein: 4 g
- Sodium: 377 mg
- Carbohydrate: 50 g
- Dietary fiber: 2 g
- Saturated fat: 2 g
- Total sugars: 27 g

*Source: MyPlate*

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# MENTAL HEALTH MINUTE

DECEMBER 2024



## Is It the Holiday Blues or Seasonal Affective Disorder?

Holiday demands, gatherings, decorations, and other emotional and financial stressors can leave people anxious and exhausted. As such, some people experience short-term holiday blues or holiday depression. Conversely, during this time of year, others may be battling seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a form of major depression.

Individuals with a prior mental health condition may be especially prone to holiday depression. A National Alliance on Mental Illness poll revealed that more than 6 in 10 people (64%) with an existing condition say the holidays make their condition worse.

Holiday depression and SAD can be difficult to distinguish from one another, but the duration and severity of symptoms are usually the best clues:

- **Holiday depression** can start around November or December and lift shortly into the new year. The symptoms are typically mild and include:

- Changes in appetite, weight and sleep patterns
- Irritability
- Worry or anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling more tired than usual

- **SAD** typically occurs for 40% of the year, starting late fall or early winter and lasting until the spring or summer. Symptoms are often more severe and debilitating.

## Taking Care of Yourself

If your depression symptoms seem to be short-lived and tied to the holidays, take extra care of yourself this season. Exercise regularly and drink in moderation since alcohol is a depressant. It's also important to set realistic expectations for the holidays. Lastly, try to find time for yourself in the hustle and bustle of the season and understand it's OK to say no to avoid overcommitting.

If your symptoms interfere with your ability to function or the holiday blues persist into the new year, it may be time to seek professional help from a health care provider. They can diagnose symptoms, discuss treatment and provide guidance.

## Embracing a Digital Detox

Beyond work, people depend on technological devices for information, communication and entertainment. However, constant attachment to devices can have harmful effects on your mental health. To combat these issues, you may consider a digital detox or a disconnection from devices or social media for a defined duration.

Begin your digital detox by determining which behaviors you'd like to address and creating a plan that works for you. Try these strategies for an effective digital detox:

- **Turn off notifications.** Notifications are distracting and can hinder productivity.
- **Use digital detox tools.** Many devices have built-in tools that can silence notifications or disable apps for a certain period.
- **Start your day tech-free.** Instead, use the first hour of the day for activities such as exercising, spending time outside or preparing a healthy breakfast. The goal is to create a morning routine that sets a positive tone for the day

and supports brain health.

- **Take periodic breaks from technology.** Eliminating the use of all digital devices may not be realistic, especially if you use them for work. Instead, set limits for how much time you spend on social media each day or designate certain times for phone use.
- **Create gadget-free zones.** To be more present in your day, designate specific areas in your home, such as the dining room and bedrooms, where gadgets are not allowed.
- **Reach out for support.** Family and friends can offer emotional support during your digital detox. They can hold you accountable and keep you motivated when you're struggling to stick to your goals.

With a digital detox, you can break unhealthy habits and embrace more balanced, healthier alternatives. For further guidance, contact a mental health professional.



# Blue Cornmeal Pancakes

December 2024 Recipe

Makes: 12 servings



## Ingredients

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup blue cornmeal  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp. salt  
1 cup boiling water  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup milk  
2 Tbsp. margarine (melted)  
1 egg  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  cup flour  
2 tsp. baking powder  
Cooking spray  
Light syrup or honey (optional)

## Nutritional information for 1 serving

Calories	85
Total fat	3 g
Saturated fat	1 g
Cholesterol	N/A
Sodium	159 mg
Carbohydrate	12 g
Dietary fiber	1 g
Total sugars	1 g
Added sugars included	0 g
Protein	2 g

## Directions

- 1.** In a large bowl, mix the cornmeal and salt. Stir in the boiling water until the ingredients are wet. Cover and let stand for 3 minutes.
- 2.** In a separate bowl, mix the milk, melted margarine, and egg or egg mix and water mixture. Add to the cornmeal mixture.
- 3.** Add flour and baking powder to the bowl and mix until combined.
- 4.** Heat a large skillet over medium heat and spray with cooking spray.
- 5.** Spoon  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of the batter on the skillet. When bubbles appear, flip and cook the other side until golden brown. Serve with syrup, honey, yogurt or fresh fruit if desired.