

A Minding of the Meats

By Melanie Peters | October 27, 2017

Most holiday meals revolve around a featured main dish and while the way people celebrate the holidays may differ from family to family, chances are that dish is meat-based. In the weeks to come, we'll be faced with plenty of Thanksgiving turkeys, prime rib roasts and holiday hams, which begs the question: which of the traditional holiday meats — turkey, beef or ham — is the healthiest?

Well first, let's talk protein. Protein, made of amino acids, is essential to a healthy, balanced diet as it helps build and repair muscle. Meat, poultry and fish contain the [amino acids we need](#) [↗](#). Lean proteins are especially beneficial as they have little to no effect on [blood sugar](#) and are considered a "[low energy density food](#)," which means you can eat more of them while keeping your calorie count down, something we're all looking to do during the hustle and bustle of the food-laden holiday season. And while the latest guidelines for a healthy, balanced diet are to follow one that is more plant-based, meat can still be a play a role, [albeit a limited one](#).



So let's talk turkey. And beef. And yes, ham! Of the three, turkey is probably the easiest

to feel virtuous about consuming. It's lean, protein-rich and [packed with B vitamins](#) [↗](#). The real

trap here isn't the Rockwellian roast on the Thanksgiving table, but the indulgent, often carb- and fat-laden sides (think mashed potatoes loaded with butter and cream). On the slightly less-guilty end of the spectrum is beef. Beef is high in [iron and zinc](#), and a good source for vitamin B12 and omega-3 fatty acids. But the key here is "lean": [the leaner the beef, the better](#).

Which brings us to ham. While ham does have protein, it's often very high in sodium — especially if cured, and can be high in sugar, too (think glazed ham). Ham is considered a processed meat, which means it belongs on the "occasional" list, especially as there is some evidence that eating too much processed meat may increase your [risk for some cancers](#). As with beef, if you're going to have ham, look for [leaner, lower sodium varieties](#). Of course, if you're faced with the *pièce de résistance* of a holiday glazed ham and don't want to be a rude guest, just try to keep your portion to a minimum and load-up your plate with veggies.

Here are three recipe ideas and here's to a happy, healthy, holiday season!

Slow Cooker Mini Meat Loaves and Polenta ([recipe courtesy of Woman's Day](#))

With all the hustle and bustle of holiday shopping and entertaining, slow cooker meals can be a time- and life-saver. This recipe jazzes your everyday meatloaf and mashed potatoes with a flavorful, Italian-style tomato sauce and polenta offers the belly-filling comfort of mashed potatoes without the added fat. Use lean ground beef to keep the calories low.

Classic Italian Turkey Meatballs ([recipe courtesy of FoodNetwork](#))

The holiday season means lots of entertaining and who doesn't love a good cocktail meatball? This version uses turkey instead of beef and is baked, which cuts down on added fat.

Ham and Broccoli Breakfast Casserole ([recipe courtesy of EatingWell](#))

A casserole is a great way to feed a crowd. This recipe calls for lean, low sodium ham and is packed full of good-for you protein and fiber.
