

Surviving the Holidays: advice for my patients

By

Jeffrey Pearson, D.O.

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Labor Day came and went. Despite the appearance of Christmas decorations at the nearby Costco that same week, most did not panic. But now that Halloween is history and Thanksgiving is here, get set for the winter equivalent of March Madness: December's Delights and/or Debacles. There's precious little time to prepare for the deluge that is about to befall our patients. What's the best advice that we can provide? According to "Dr. Google," there are some basic concerns that we should address along with appropriate advice to help our patients survive the holiday season.

"I'm going to get fat."

First off, be realistic. Don't even try to lose weight over the holidays. Rather, strive to maintain your current weight instead. Some suggestions:

- Never skip meals. The brain interprets skipped meals as starving and metabolism will slow down. Better to eat small meals (low in sugar/starches) throughout the day (6 times/day or more). This keeps insulin levels lower and on a more even keel (wide insulin swings can lead to increase appetite). Start the day off with a healthy breakfast to fuel the machine that is our body and store healthy snacks around the home.
- How to survive holiday parties and get-togethers:
 - o Never arrive ravenously hungry with an empty stomach. Eat a little bit before you go to the party.
 - o Don't just eat everything in sight. Know what you really want to eat. Eat things that are special to the season. If bringing food for potluck, bring something that you're sure is healthy.
 - o Eat slowly and mindfully. If standing, hold a glass of water in one hand and talk to a lot of people.
 - o Eat until you're satisfied, not stuffed. Use small plates to limit portions and don't build "towers" of food. Stand last in the buffet line as it's very tempting to take something of everything when it's all laid out so pristine. Set a "one plate" rule and leave what you don't want – it's better to waste food, than "waist" it.
 - o Wear tight clothes and consider chewing gum after you finish your food to remove the temptation for continued nibbling.
 - o Consume your alcohol "on the rocks" – the melting ice dilutes the cocktail, creating more fluid thus delaying a fast "buzz." Sip it slowly and consider using soda water as a mixer as a way to cut down on the sugar intake. Suggest stopping alcohol hours before bedtime giving blood levels a chance to normalize before sleep. This will promote a more restive sleep. And, of course alcohol loosens inhibitions – beware of overeating.

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- Watch for hidden caffeine such as chocolate that can also affect sleep later on.

“I’m going to get sick.”

To my mind, “Black Friday” (the day after Thanksgiving) signals the start of the busy season in my office. Suddenly, shopping malls across the nation turn into Petri dishes brimming with influenza and other contagious illnesses. And then there are food poisonings from ill-prepared holiday meals to consider. The very old and the very young are at greatest risk for these. What to do?

- Respiratory illnesses
 - Wash hands! Wash hands! Wash hands!
 - Get a flu shot
 - Wash hands! Wash hands! Wash hands!
- Gastrointestinal
 - Food safety must be ensured. Don’t eat anything that doesn’t taste right.
 - Clean everything
 - Hands and work surfaces. Do NOT wash poultry, though because that can spread the bacteria around.
 - Separate raw foods and their juices from foods that don’t get cooked.
 - Consider separate cutting boards along these lines.
 - Cooking safe
 - Go by measured internal temperatures – NOT by color.
 - Refrigeration/freezing
 - Chill foods quickly to halt bacterial growth
 - Never defrost food at room temperature
 - Defrost in refrigerator or under cold running water (use immediately if this method employed).
- Other issues
 - Keep track of your prescription medication supply. Don’t run out of a necessary medication when you need it the most and the pharmacies are closed. Get refills planned before you need them. This is especially true if you plan to travel over the holidays – for example, a type I diabetic wouldn’t want to get stuck in paradise without their insulin.
 - For urgencies and emergencies, know in advance what urgent care centers and hospitals are in your health plan, and find out which are open on the holidays should such a need arise.

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“I’m so stressed!”

It’s been said “stress makes life more interesting” and, according to my recent fortune cookie experience, Confucius said “May you live in interesting times.” Aside from the fact that stress makes people uncomfortable to varying degrees, it also stimulates cortisol that deposits belly fat potentially leading to weight gain and perhaps even more stress. Consider the following “Jedi Mind Tricks” to keep you sane over the holidays.

- Attitude is everything
 - o How you look at things matter. Remember that these same holidays recur every year. This takes the pressure off from thinking that something absolutely must be done this year. It’s okay to skip a particular tradition this year and do it the next instead.
- Say “No”
 - o Avoid burnout by learning how to say “no.” You do not have to attend every party to which you’re invited. Simplify your life and take some breaks. Want to volunteer? Great, but don’t feel obligated to take on more than you can handle.
- Hang with friends and focus on others
 - o Surround yourself with “positive energy” types.
 - o Overwhelmed fighting crowded stores for gifts? Consider giving back to the community by volunteering (local toy drives, food banks). Consider choosing charity gifts whereby you send out gift cards that allow the recipient to select the charity of their choice. Per the Broadway show *Avenue Q*, “When you help others, you can’t help helping yourself!” It’s true – you’ll feel better.
- Get enough sleep
 - o When the body gets run down, the first system to falter is the immune system rendering you more susceptible to getting sick. Ever notice how herpes –type viral infections (e.g. fever blisters, shingles) always seem to erupt at those times? You’ll fight off the flu better if you’re well rested.
- Stay active
 - o While exercise is not great for weight loss (makes you hungrier and crave sugars/starches), it is very good for maintaining weight and for stress reduction. Get those endorphins pumping with regular mild-to –moderate aerobic activities 3-5 times week. If possible, aim for intensity level where you can talk, but not sing.

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Light weight training 2-3 times per week tones muscles helping to better regulate the body's insulin levels, as well.

- Pamper yourself
 - o It's been a long, tough year for many. You owe it to yourself to do something selfish just for you. Consider arranging for a massage or perhaps indulge in some healthy dark chocolate and red wine!
- Be flexible/adapt to change
 - o Life is an improvisation. The basic tenet of improv is to agree and move the scene forward. You must accept what is handed to you and build upon it for the betterment of the group. Likewise, there are no "do-overs" in life. It changes continually. Learning how to accept that which cannot be changed and move forward is an important coping skill.
- Laugh
 - o While on the subject of improv, laughing significantly reduces the levels of stress hormones. Rent comedies for example (the holiday classic "A Christmas Story" and "Elf" are good choices). Find a good joke and learn how to tell it well. Share it with others. And, who knows? Lowering your cortisol levels through laughing just might help you to lose that belly fat.
- Learn to meditate and relax. Be mindful of what goes on around you in your life. Learn to take a deep breath.

Wishing you all a healthy, happy, and stress-free holiday season!