Stay Healthy for the Holidays

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Holiday Health Tips

The holidays can be a wonderful time filled with family, parties, gifts and get-togethers. That also opens the door to a lot of stress, upended routines, exposure to germs and other challenges that can ruin the season.

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If you're feeling pressured with all the things you should and shouldn't be doing to stay healthy during an already crazy time of year, check out the CDC's tips for easy ways to boost your health.

1. Wash your hands frequently, particularly when you're preparing food. Use soap and clean water and wash for at least 20 seconds.

2. Put your hat, coat and gloves on when you go outside. Warm socks and waterproof boots will make a huge difference if it's snowing outside. No one likes cold, wet feet.

3. Find ways to manage stress. Go on walks, go to bed early, schedule alone time, take a bath. Give yourself a break when things don't go perfectly.

4. Don't drink too much alcohol, and definitely don't drink and drive. Take the keys away from a friend or family member who's not safe to drive.

5. Get vaccinated. It's flu season, and nothing kills your holiday party faster than you being in bed with the flu. Everyone six months and older should get vaccinated. It's a good chance to ensure you're up to date on your other vaccinations as well.

6. Be safe around fire. Most house fires happen in the winter. Don't leave fireplaces, space heaters, food cooking or candles unattended.

7. Know what your kids are up to. The holidays bring out decorations, cheese trays with knives, candles and other potentially dangerous objects at your house and other's houses.

8. Prepare food safely. Wash your hands and cooking surfaces often, wash everything after working with raw meat, avoid cross-contamination, cook foods to their proper temperatures and put foods in the refrigerator immediately. Reheat leftovers to the proper temperatures as well.

9. Take the family for a walk. Whether it's after a big meal or to enjoy the snow or to wear off some energy, put good shoes on and get outside for a bit. At least 30 minutes of exercise will keep everybody happier and healthier.

Stay Healthy During Party Season

The first step to holiday diet success is to throw out the diet. Don't try to lose weight between Halloween and New Year's Eve.

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You're almost certainly setting yourself up for failure. Instead, shoot to maintain your current weight and as close to current habits as possible and look for ways to make good choices while still eating good food and having holiday fun. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had tips for the holidays.

Stick to your regular eating schedule. If you know you'll be eating late in the evening or you're eating brunch, eat a healthy snack at your regular meal time and eat a little less at the meal. If you know you'll be eating a big meal later, eat less throughout the day, but don't skip meals. You'll end up really hungry when you sit down and eat and likely will overeat.

Avoid buffets if possible. If not, use a small plate, take small servings of your favorite foods and eat slowly, savoring each bite. Don't feel you need to skip your favorite dishes because they're unhealthy. You may find yourself craving them later and eat more than you intended. Take a small serving of those delicious dishes.

When you're not at restaurants or at parties, fill your meals with fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and drink lots of water. Sometimes the human body confuses thirst with hunger and you wind up with cravings.

Get enough sleep. When you're tired, you tend to eat more and you crave high-fat, high-sugar foods; plus, you'll be better able to handle the extra stresses of the busy holiday season with seven to eight hours of sleep behind you.

Continue to exercise regularly. Stick to your regular habits as much as possible, getting aerobic activity five to seven times a week. That can be a 30-minute walk or a more intense gym workout, just make sure you're out moving. (Shoveling snow counts too.) If it's too cold to be outside, find a workout online or lift weights at home. Or take advantage of winter weather and go snowshoeing, downhill or cross-country skiing or snowboarding or get the family outside and have a snowball fight. Just keep moving.

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It's hard to eat healthy during the holidays when that may be the one time of year you eat your favorite recipes.

Shoot for eating smaller portions, but if you want to keep those but bump up the nutrition a bit, the Mayo Clinic had suggestions for substitutions or replacements to keep your favorite recipes on the table but lighten them up a little bit.

Cut down on fat, salt and sugar. In baked goods, replace half the butter or oil with applesauce, mashed banana or prune puree. Alternatively, look for fruit-based fat replacers in the baking aisle of your local grocery store. Fruit also will add sweetness to these recipes, so cut down the sugar. You also can reduce the amount of sugar by a third or so and add cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg or vanilla or almond flavoring. You can cut back on salt but boost flavor with the addition of herbs.

Cut back on toppings. Instead of frosting on sugar cookies, add sprinkles before they bake or roll them in sugar. Avoid or cut back on whipped cream on pie. Avoid condiments like olives, mayonnaise, jelly, pickles and heavy salad dressings, swapping them for fresh garnishes like cucumbers, tomatoes, reduced-fat spreads or low-salt versions of your favorite sauces.

Look for ways to substitute ingredients. Use whole wheat pasta, brown rice, whole wheat flour and other whole grains instead of the regular enriched white flour versions. Use skim or reduced-fat milk instead of whole milk or substitute milk for a cream. Cut back on meat in casseroles or make meat servings small while bumping up the vegetables on the plate.

Change how you prepare food. How you prepare your food can make a huge difference in terms of health. Using healthy cooking techniques like braising, broiling, grilling, poaching, sautéing and steaming food. If you want to try something trendy, look into sous vide cooking, which involves boiling food as it's wrapped in airtight plastic. Instead of basting the meat with its own juices, use wine, fruit juice or broth. Using nonstick pans will mean your foods need less fat as well.

Staying Healthy During Travel

Hopefully you're excited about where you're going for the holidays, but you might not be thrilled about getting there.

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Traveling during the holidays can be stressful, get you in the vicinity of strangers and their germs and have you awake at strange hours and eating meals in the airport or at rest stops. In addition to washing your hands liberally to stave off those germs, the CDC recommends things you can do to stay healthy as you're running through the airport.

IF YOU'RE DRIVING

Pack healthy snacks and drink lots of water. Driving means snacking for many of us, and it's easy to load up on chips and donuts at the convenience store. Instead, bring grapes, apples, carrots, celery, cheese sticks and other easy-to-grab items that'll satisfy your snacking urge. When you stop to use the bathroom or check out a viewpoint, stretch your legs and walk for a few minutes.

Keep blankets and extra food and water in your car as well in case you hit winter weather and get stuck.

IF YOU'RE FLYING

Snacks are a little harder to get through security, but having a few healthy snacks for the airport and the flight can help keep you from unhealthy and expensive airport food. Bring a reusable water bottle and fill it up at the airport. (Don't fill it up before you go through security.) Whenever possible, walk to your gate, including using the stairs. It's a good way to get your blood moving and muscles working on a day when you'll be doing a lot of sitting.

Drink water on the plane. Make a point to get up and walk around. Go to the bathroom (wait until there's a line if you want to spend more time on your feet) to avoid swelling in your legs and feet.

Get a flu shot before you go. The holidays are the height of flu season, and enclosed metal tubes are a great place for viruses to spread. If there's a particularly bad outbreak, bring a face mask.

IF YOU'RE GOING ABROAD

Get any recommended vaccines and figure out if there are health concerns at your destination. Pay attention to things like disease outbreaks and the water supply. Ensure you have enough of any medications you'll need and take painkillers and other meds you might need. Find out if your health plan works abroad and consider buying additional insurance if it doesn't.

Winter Sports Safety Tips

Winter weather doesn't have to drive you and your family inside; there are plenty of ways to get outside and enjoy the cold.

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Of course, winter sports come with some risk, not the least of which is putting your kid on two sticks and sending her off down the mountain. Snowboarding accounts for a quarter of all emergency room visits during the winter, and sledding causes more than 52,000 injuries a year. Learn what Stanford Children's Health suggests you do to minimize the risk and maximize the fun.

SKIING AND SNOWBOARDING

Make sure your equipment is working and that it fits properly. Get helmets that are specifically designed for skiing or snowboarding, not a bike helmet. Don't reuse a helmet that's already taken a big hit.

Know your child's fitness and ability level, take frequent breaks and reinforce the importance of staying on runs that aren't too hard. Many injuries are caused by lack of control; either the person is moving too fast or going down a slope that's beyond their ability. Consider getting professional lessons for your children; even a little time with a teacher can get them comfortable on the mountain, on their skis and with the chairlift.

Even on a cloudy day, wear sunglasses and sunscreen. On top of a mountain, you're closer to the sun, plus light is reflecting off the snow. Sunburns actually occur more easily on a ski trip than on the beach.

SLEDDING

Look into your sledding options. A steerable sled is a good idea; inner tubes, saucers and snow disks put your child at greater risk because they go fast but can't be steered effectively. Even with no obstacles nearby, that can present a hazard. Also, pick a good place to sled—stay away from steep or icy hills, streets or driveways and areas with trees, walls or cars. Make sure the snow is well-packed; loose snow can be a hazard. Make sure your children can safely walk back up the hill.

Stanford Children's recommends that children younger than 12 wear a helmet while sledding. In all winter sports, dress appropriately and watch for signs of frostbite.

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Some people find themselves suffering winter-related depression — a combination of not being able to go outside as much, not seeing the sun, fewer opportunities to be social and the general grayness that accompanies winter.

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Seasonal affective disorder, also known as SAD, is a type of depression that typically starts in the late fall or early winter and lasts for the duration of the cold season. Though no cause is known, researchers found clues from people with SAD, including difficulty regulating a key neurotransmitter that affects serotonin; overproduction of melatonin; and less production of Vitamin D. The National Institute of Mental Health listed the risk factors, symptoms and possible treatments for SAD.

SYMPTOMS

Since SAD is a type of depression, look for the same signs and symptoms: feeling depressed most of the day; feeling hopeless or worthless; low energy; losing interest in hobbies; difficulty sleeping; changes in appetite or weight; difficulty concentrating; and frequent thoughts of suicide. Symptoms of SAD include: low energy; hypersomnia; overeating; weight gain; craving carbohydrates; and withdrawing socially. Contact a doctor if you are experiencing these systems or if someone in your family is experiencing them.

RISK FACTORS

Gender, geography and genealogy all play a role in your likelihood of being affected by SAD. Women are more likely to be diagnosed; people with a family history of depression are more likely to develop SAD; and people who live farther from the Equator, north or south, or more likely to experience seasonal effective disorder. Age (young people are at greater risk) and a history of mental illness also are risk factors.

TREATMENTS

There are a number of effective treatments for this serious condition. Light therapy has been around since the 1980s, with the idea being to replace the reduced sunshine on winter days by daily exposure to bright artificial light. People sit in front of light boxes, which filter out UV rays and emit 10,000 lux of cool-white fluorescent light, about 20 times more than regular lighting. Medication, including antidepressants, can be effective, as can taking Vitamin D supplements, though this is not typically sufficient on its own to treat SAD. Your doctor may also recommend therapy.

Cold Weather Tips

Winter weather brings a whole host of potential threats to your health, both inside and outside. You can't avoid all of them, but you can take steps to reduce risks for you and your family this winter. The CDC outlines risks of which to be aware and what you can do to mitigate them.

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When you're outside, dress warmly and in layers. (If you're too hot, you may sweat, and if you later get cold that wetness puts you at a greater risk of hypothermia.) This includes a warm coat, gloves or mittens, a hat, a scarf and winter or waterproof boots. Wear warm clothes underneath, as you may find yourself shedding layers if you're snowshoeing, shoveling the driveway or otherwise working hard.

Watch for signs of frostbite and hypothermia. We tend to think you have to spend hours in very cold weather to be at risk, but it's much easier than we think.

Pay attention to your body when shoveling snow. It's very hard work, and people who aren't used to that level of work could be putting themselves at risk of a heart attack or another injury.

Be prepared for ice. Sprinkle ice melt, sand or cat litter on sidewalks and driveways. Walk carefully when you're out walking the dog or getting your regular exercise. Don't walk on iced-over bodies of water, including streams and ponds.

Get your house ready for winter. This includes plugging any places where hot air could seep out, and make sure your heating systems are working, the chimney is clear and your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are working. Don't warm your car up in the garage with the door closed, which could pump carbon monoxide into your house. Symptoms of CO poisoning include headache, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain and confusion. It can be fatal.

Pay attention to road conditions. If they're icy or snowy, stay home or take public transit, if possible. If you need to drive, go slowly, allowing yourself plenty of time to get there; allow for plenty of distance between your car and the car in front of you; pump your brakes when you stop and steer cautiously—no sharp turns. Always wear your seat belt and keep supplies in the car in case you get stuck and have to wait for a while.