

13 holiday survival tips



The “holiday season” is now fully underway. It’s supposed to be a joyous time, full of fellowship, happiness and hope, but for many it’s a time of stress and excess.

We embark on a non-stop “potlatch” of overeating and drinking, our exercise resolutions fall by the wayside, we shop incessantly and rack up credit card debt, and we often find that the holidays don’t meet our idyllic expectations. Instead of feeling uplifted, we wind up feeling enervated, exhausted, physically out of sorts, and depressed.

It’s sometimes been claimed that the average American gains a whopping 7-10 pounds over the holidays, but a 2000 study sought to debunk that myth.



The typical weight gain is around a pound or two, but for already overweight individuals, it’s more like 5 lbs. And a stark fact emerged from the study: of the aggregate annual weight gain for Americans, 51% occurred during the six week holiday period alone!

I take the position that during the holidays, it’s a good time to “pay it forward” with healthier eating and consistent exercise as well as self-nurturing lifestyle practices. That

way, you won't wake up ruefully after the Bowl Games are over with a huge holiday hangover, and a bulging waistline.

Here are some tips for surviving the holidays:

1) Work Out: More people are heeding this advice according to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* "The Calorie Burn Before the Thanksgiving Feast" According to this article, "Turkey Day has transformed into one of the biggest workout days in the US; half-marathon first, then pie." Fun events like your local Turkey Trot enable you to pre-atone for the day's inevitable excesses; or maybe you can get together with your old high school buddies for a game of tag football or a pickup basketball game.

Consistency is important—maintain your routine at the gym as a health "anchor" during the disruptive holidays. Your workouts will not only keep you lean, they'll also generate endorphins to bust your holiday stress.

2) Practice "defensive eating": Temptations WILL abound. Therefore, eat light healthy meals when you're not celebrating. And try this little trick: to avoid putting the feedbag on during a party or holiday meal where the choices may not be that optimal, have a nutritious snack BEFORE you go. That'll take the edge off your appetite and enable you to make more rational food decisions.

3) Don't overbook: Holiday freneticism is hard to avoid. Deliberately create "circuit breakers" in your schedule to avoid Yule burnout.

4) Ease up on the holiday spirits: Too much alcohol will dehydrate you, deplete you of electrolytes, and burden your already holiday-challenged detoxification pathways. Plus, while initially relaxing, the rebound from an alcohol buzz can leave you more anxious and disrupt your natural sleep patterns. It's OK to have an occasional juice spritzer instead of that highball of Wild Turkey!

5) Get adequate sleep: The holidays are a busy time, so don't shortchange your sleep. You'll feel better, you'll enhance your resistance to viruses, and you'll even put the brakes on runaway carb cravings.

6) Light it up: The holidays coincide with the darkest time of the year. Get some light in your eyes with an early morning walk, or consider a light box to fend off Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

7) Cold adapt: Don't become a hothouse flower—turn your thermostat down to deepen your sleep and help you acclimate to the winter. Don't shun the outdoors—bundle up and face the elements. The chill will stimulate up regulation of your brown fat—the fat-BURNING kind that promotes weight loss.

8) Overcome the blues: While it may seem paradoxical to be depressed during the traditional "Season of Joy," it's actually quite natural. The contrast between your circumstances and the illusion that everyone else has it better is never so accentuated. Unhappy childhood memories surface, and loneliness and feelings of failure are highlighted against a festive background.

If you are prey to these feelings around holiday time, don't hesitate to seek help. Friends, family, a clergy member or even a good self-help book may work, but seek professional counseling if you can't shake the Holiday Blues.

9) Defy consumerism: It's unrealistic to expect that the reality of our holiday experience will match the idealized hype. After all, retailers want us to buy a lot of material stuff, which whips us into a shopping frenzy, and inevitably leaves us disappointed when we can't "have it all." Manage your expectations and enjoy the little things about the holiday season. Think about its true meaning, and leave room amidst the glitz to get in touch with your spirituality.

10) Create a "quiet oasis": Amid all the demands of the

holidays, you need a place to retreat. Create a calm zone where, for a few hours a week, you won't be preoccupied with shopping, parties, or family obligations. Avoid the temptation to check your email, texts, holiday sales announcements or social media for a short time each day. Read a favorite book, listen to music, or enjoy a regular hobby to reboot your brain.

11) Flex your altruism muscles: The holidays are a great time to “give back”—and I don't mean just stuffing envelopes for your doorman or postman. The dirty dark secret about altruism is that it's actually selfish—studies show that giving can enhance health and extend longevity.

Volunteering is a way of getting out of yourself and reaping the benefits of generosity. You can help a senior citizen, visit the sick, shop for Christmas toys for needy kids, tutor a child, or mentor an aspiring young person. Most localities maintain a roster of volunteer opportunities.

12) Get some D: Vitamin D is in short supply in the winter months. This can lead to such diverse problems as heightened risk for insulin resistance, autoimmune disease and cancer; but in the short term, vitamin D deficiency is associated with bodily aches and pains, depression, and weight gain. So brighten up your holidays with a generous dose of vitamin D (2000-5000 IUs), preferably after getting tested for levels and with monitoring from a health professional. For some, judicious tanning can replicate the benefits of a trip to a sunnier latitude—regardless of whether artificial or natural, UV light has been shown to boost mood-enhancing endorphins.

13) Avoid isolation: Loneliness can kill. Scientific studies verify it. This holiday, reach out to friends and family members whose social networks are limited. If you're feeling left out, take part in a volunteer activity or communal worship service.

Employing some of these simple survival tips will guarantee that, come Super Bowl Sunday, you won't have joined the ranks of America's holiday disabled list!