

13 tips for surviving the holidays (part one)



This coming week marks the official launch of the “holiday season.” It’s supposed to be a joyous time, full of fellowship and hope, but for many it’s a time of stress and gluttony. We embark on a non-stop “potlatch” of overeating and drinking, our exercise resolve falls 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 stressed, 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 recent 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!



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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 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) 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!

4) 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.

5) Cold adapt: Don’t become a hothouse flower—turn your

thermostat down to deepen your sleep and help you to acclimate to the winter. Don't shun the outdoors—bundle up and face the elements. The chill will stimulate upregulation of your brown fat—the fat-BURNING kind that promotes weight loss.

6) 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 sunnier latitudes—regardless of whether artificial or natural, UV light has been shown to boost mood-enhancing endorphins.

These tips will help to keep your body in good shape over the holidays, but what about your mind? It's no secret that the winter holidays (and the winter season in general) can be tough on our emotional and mental health. Coming up, I'll have seven more tips for you, focusing on how to keep yourself emotionally healthy during the taxing holiday season.

Wishing all of my readers a Happy Thanksgiving week!