

Health And Family



Staying healthy this Christmas

AN APPLE A DAY By Tyrone M. Reyes, M.D. (The Philippine Star) Updated December 15, 2009 12:00 AM



Illustration by REY RIVERA

Christmas is that one time of the year when your health could be at risk – from developing psychological depression to suffering a holiday heart attack. In addition, your health may suffer from just simply eating too much or abandoning your exercise routine due to your busy holiday schedule.

Here are some simple, practical, easy DIY tips for staying healthy and for looking and feeling great during this holiday season:

- Weigh your bag. If your tote is a dumping ground for everything from keys to cell phones, it's time to lighten your load. Researchers recommend that a bag should not be more than 10 percent of your body weight. Put yours on your bathroom scale to see how it measures up. "Carrying too much can lead to debilitating back and shoulder pain, overall muscle soreness, and even dangerous nerve compression," says Samuel N. Forjuch, MD, director of the division of research at Texas A & M College of Medicine in College Station.
- Hold your spouse's hand. Thirty minutes of skin-to-skin contact promotes the release of the feel-good hormone oxytocin, resulting in lower blood pressure and a slower heart rate.
- Go fish, twice a week. A three-ounce serving (the size of a deck of cards) of fatty fish — such as tuna or salmon — every three to four days will help prevent breast cancer, Alzheimer's disease, hypertension, and diabetes, according to research published in the journal *Biomedicine & Pharmacotherapy*. The benefit comes from omega-3 fatty acids, which can also be found in walnuts, tofu, squash, and soybeans.
- Take a few deep breaths before bed. Tossing and turning all night not only leaves you feeling sluggish the next day, it also elevates the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, say researchers at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. "Improve your sleep by focusing on your breathing when you lie down," says lead study author Edward Suarez, PhD, an associate professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences. "Concentrate on exhaling and inhaling. Try to stop your mind from wandering to worrisome thoughts about what you need to do tomorrow, or rehashing any problems you faced during that day."
- Watch a sitcom. A TV comedy may be mindless entertainment, but it could give your heart a boost. In a University of Maryland study, people who watched 15 to 30 minutes of a funny show increased their blood flow by about 22 percent (similar to the benefit from low-intensity exercise). When we laugh, blood vessels dilate due to the release of the protective chemical nitric oxide, which also reduces cholesterol buildup.
- Turn off that cell phone. Motorists who talk on a cell phone while driving lowers their magnesium. In a recent study, people with below-average magnesium levels had to work harder when performing basic tasks like lifting, and as a result felt more fatigued afterwards than those with adequate levels. Low magnesium has also been linked with type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.
- Turn on some tunes. Plug your iPod and you may also lower your blood pressure, say researchers from Seattle University. The rhythms in music relax blood vessels and moderate the production of stress hormones.
- Log off at 9 p.m. Using your computer close to bedtime upsets your circadian rhythm, making it harder to fall asleep. The monitor's bright display inhibits production of melatonin, the hormone responsible for telling the body it's time for bed.

- Floss twice a day. Even on mornings when you're rushing to get out of the house – and nights when you're ready to collapse into bed – don't forget your brush – and – floss routine. "Your mouth harbors 400 to 800 kinds of bacteria, which have harmful effects on overall health because they allow unwanted germs to enter the bloodstream," says Violet I. Haraszthy, PhD, an associate professor at the University of Buffalo in New York. "This can predispose people to diabetes, respiratory diseases, rheumatoid arthritis, obesity, osteoporosis, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer."
- Call a pal. Just one day of feeling down can cause an increase in the amount of the stress hormone cortisol circulating in your body, which over time can contribute to a host of diseases, says Louise Hawkey, PhD, a senior research scientist at the University of Chicago. So beat the blues by making plans to get together with friends.
- Wear flats more often. You'll take an average of 491 more steps a day than your high-heeled colleagues. While this might not sound like much, 500 additional steps can help you drop a few pounds by the end of the year.
- Protect your peepers. Even on partly cloudy days, exposing your eyes to sunlight without protection increases your risk of developing macular degeneration – a condition that results in loss of vision in the center of the visual field, due to damage to the retina. So treat yourself to a new pair of sunglasses to filter out harmful rays.
- Reach for the sky. Every two to three hours throughout the day, stop and stretch. You'll reduce pain and prevent headaches, reports a new study out of the University of Turin in Italy. Try this move from the researchers: Cup your hands behind your neck. Stretch your head backward so you're looking up at the ceiling. Relax after two to three seconds.
- Clear your airways. To reduce symptoms - such as asthma, sneezing, itchy eyes and headaches – triggered by indoor allergens, dust furniture and vacuum the floor regularly. Change bed linens weekly and replace mattresses that are more than 10 years old.
- Sport a milk moustache. A new study suggests that eating a calcium-rich diet is more effective than taking calcium supplements in building bone density to prevent osteoporosis. Only 35 percent of the calcium in most supplements ends up being absorbed by the body, says lead researcher Reina Armamento-Villareal, MD, of the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, while 45 percent of the calcium in food is absorbed. Aim for 1,200 mg. a day, which you can get from a cup of yogurt, a cup from low-intensity exercise. When we laugh, blood vessels dilate due to the release of the protective chemical nitric oxide, which also reduces cholesterol buildup.
- Change your toothbrush. Don't wait until the bristles are frayed to purchase another one. A new brush removes up to 30 percent more plaque than a three-month-old one, according to a study in the Journal of Dental Research. So change yours at least every quarter. The heads of electronic toothbrushes should also be changed as often.
- Shun second-hand smoke. A recent study from China found that people who were exposed to cigarette smoke for just 15 minutes two to more days a week increased their risk of stroke by 56 percent and increased their risk of developing coronary heart disease by 69 percent. Encourage your loved ones not to smoke (especially if you live together) and avoid bars and restaurants that allow cigarettes. And always request a nonsmoking hotel room when you're traveling.

Have a healthy holiday season!

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