

Healthy Holiday Survival Guide

Holiday parties and shopping can make this the most exciting time of the year. But entertaining, eating out, and stress can add unwanted pounds to your waistline. Resolve to make this holiday season your healthiest yet, with more energy and vitality. With a few simple steps you can come through the next few weeks looking and feeling your best!



Follow this advice to enjoy a little holiday indulgence without sacrificing your health goals.

Indulge Without Overindulging

Relax. You won't gain 10 pounds. It's a misconception that you'll need to go up a pant size in January. The average person gains 1-2 lbs. during the weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's. That's no excuse to eat with abandon, though. (After all, gaining one pound every year can add up in the long run.) So, if you lose control with a dish of chocolate truffles, don't think, I've blown it. Just forgive yourself for the truffles.



Don't skip meals. It seems logical: Forgo lunch; leave more room for pigs in blankets at the office party later. But arriving starved may result in overeating, and drinking on an empty stomach will intoxicate you quicker, which is more likely to lead to mindless munching. Eat normally during the day, and be strategic at the buffet. Don't bother with things you don't absolutely love. Splurge on something special, then stop.

Count your bites. Many appetizers are about 60 calories a bite. Just five bites is around 300 calories. That's about half of what you might eat for dinner. Keep a mental tab—or fill a small plate, once—so you don't go overboard.

Give yourself a break from the gym. According to a Gallup poll, the percentage of people who exercise regularly is lower in December than at any other time of the year. So don't beat yourself up—you're not the only one who's too busy for Spinning class. But try to stay active in other ways. Speed-walking with shopping bags counts. So does cleaning. Add some toning by tightening your core muscles as you vacuum or reach for scattered toys (imagine trying to get your belly button to touch your spine). And most important: Get back into your regular exercise routine once the holidays end.

Drinking Responsibly

Practice moderation (really). Drinking too much may not just mean a terrible hangover. Around this time of year, doctors report seeing a spike in erratic heartbeats—dubbed "holiday heart syndrome." It is more common among people who usually aren't heavy drinkers but drink in excess for a short time.

Keep it on the rocks. Melting ice dilutes a cocktail and creates more liquid. So order your drink on the rocks to try to avoid a quick buzz—and to sip longer before a refill. Use soda water as a mixer for liquor (a cocktail with liquor and club soda is only about 100 calories), and don't be ashamed to add ice cubes to bubbly.



Put a cork in it early. Alcohol may help you to conk out quickly; the problem comes when it starts to wear off. The period in which your body is metabolizing the alcohol is when sleep is disrupted. You may wake up frequently in the middle of the night (even if you don't remember doing so) and miss out on restorative rest. The best strategy is to allow time for the alcohol levels in your body to drop before going to sleep; at the very least, retire your flute several hours before bedtime.

A to ZZZs of Sleep Deprivation

Don't let late nights make you fat. People who sleep less over time tend to be heavier. But it doesn't take long for the cycle to start. If you pull one all-nighter or miss a few hours each night over a week, your body releases hormones that prompt eating and weight gain.

Use the weekend to catch up. Most of us have sleep debt: the difference between the number of hours we need every night (which varies per person) and how many we get. If you feel best after seven hours a night and



you get five for three nights in a row during a busy week, you have a sleep debt of six hours (two missing hours for three nights). Erasing that debt requires you to get six extra hours over the course of a few days, but they don't have to be consecutive. So while you should focus on eliminating your sleep debt completely, just one good snooze (a few hours more than you normally need) can give you a fresher start.

Watch out for hidden caffeine. Think hot cocoa is a soothing way to end a winter's night? Hold on to your marshmallows. Chocolate, even the powdered kind, contains caffeine, as do many over-the-counter pain medicines that you might pop at night to get a head start on a hangover. Excedrin Extra-Strength Caplets, for example, contain 65 milligrams of caffeine; by comparison, the average cup of coffee contains 50 to 100.

Skip the sliders. Foods that are high in fat or protein require your body to work harder at digestion. When your body is busy breaking down mini hamburgers, your sleep is more likely to be hampered. Watch the clock; an early cocktail party is the perfect time to snack on something more substantial. As the night wears on, taper off. Or, if you're still hungry, have some complex carbohydrates, like whole-wheat crackers or a handful of crudités.

Beating the Blues

Don't assume that this is the most depressing time of the year. Contrary to popular belief, depression isn't more common during the holidays. In fact, suicide rates in the United States are actually lowest in December, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This may be a result of more social interaction, which has been found to enhance happiness. But that doesn't mean that you're immune to the holiday blues, especially when you're missing a family member or stressed-out by the in-laws. Make plans with friends if your family is far away—or, on the flip side, opt out of events if your schedule is overwhelming. You don't have to be a type E personality—everything to everyone.

Consider a supplement. Is there a magic pill that will cure the blues? Of course not. But some research shows that omega-3 fatty acids may relieve depression; other research has found that vitamin D may improve mood. Add a daily supplement of omega-3 or vitamin D to your diet. Or increase your intake of vitamin D–fortified milk or foods rich in omega-3s, such as fish, flaxseed, and walnuts.

Remember: The holidays aren't about obsessing over that pumpkin pie or plate of cookies. Keep perspective: Enjoy being with your loved ones, indulge in moderation, and celebrate the spirit of the season in good health.

