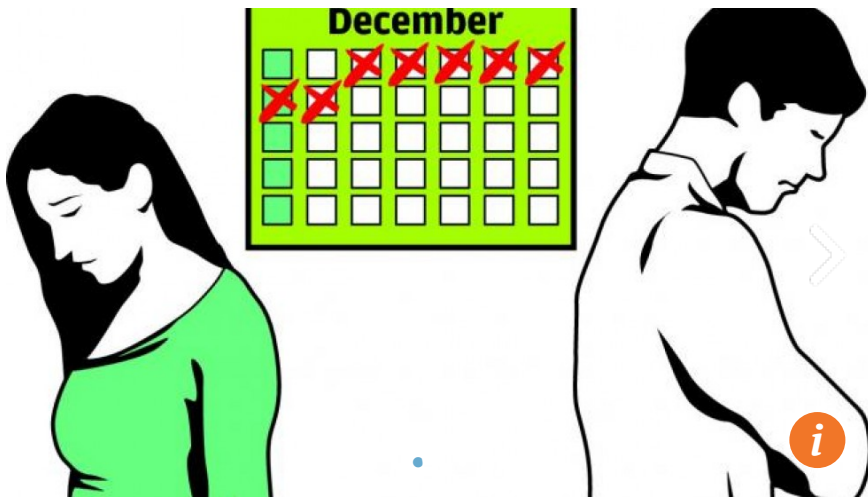


Lifestyle / Health

The survival guide to the holidays

The year-end festivities should be fun, so don't let binge eating and family disputes turn them into a nightmare, says Charley Lanyon

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Charley Lanyon

For many, the holiday season is a time to gather with loved ones, feast on seasonal delicacies and celebrate. But for others, these activities are fraught with worry. A few days of feasting can ruin a year's hard work of getting trim. Family tensions can rise and tempers can flare. For the lonely, feelings of depression can be exacerbated.

Avoid a blue Christmas - or even a trip to the hospital - with *Health Post's* survival guide to the season.

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The year-end festivities are a good reason to indulge and give that diet a break, but many tend to overeat. While most people only put on 500 grams to 1kg of weight over the holidays, research shows that even this slight weight gain may never go away.

"The problem is not working it off, even after a New Year's resolution," says Lona Sandon, assistant professor of clinical nutrition at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Centre.

"The gain stays on and adds up each year; in a decade that's [five or 10 kilograms]. That can lead to obesity and related health problems such as hypertension, stroke, diabetes and other maladies."

Charmain Tan, a Hong Kong registered dietitian with Seventeen Nutrition Consultants, says the trick is to load your plate with a balanced assortment of foods.

"Don't skimp on the greens. Also, a lot of people think they are being healthy by avoiding carbohydrates, but then they just gorge on fatty meats and desserts," Tan says.

Instead of skipping meals to save up calories for the feast, Tan advises having a light snack before the party. This will get your metabolism going, and also ensure you're not starving when you arrive.

Tan also recommends throwing parties at home instead of in restaurants, and encouraging people to contribute home-made dishes. Restaurant food is usually much higher in fat and salt than home-made fare, she says.

But food is also wrapped up in emotion, says Lucy Aphramor, a researcher and dietitian with Atrium Health, a social enterprise of Britain's Department of Health. The important thing is to listen to your body and not let food-related guilt ruin your holidays.

"Imagine food was no longer something to fight. Let yourself eat when you are hungry," she says, and don't be hard on yourself if you eat for pleasure alone. Although that sounds risky, Aphramor insists research shows people who battle with food have a tough time regulating intake, are prone to weight gain, and experience eating as a source of stress.

"People who move away from a focus on weight and eat to nourish and nurture themselves regain the pleasure of food, and are weight stable," she says.

Alcohol can be another potential holiday pitfall. Zachary Yu, a wine expert from the Langham Place hotel, says the secret is hydration. Dehydration is a major culprit in the most grievous hangover symptoms and drunken behaviour.

"If you drink a glass of wine, drink at least half a glass of water," says Yu.

Try not to mix your booze and avoid spirits altogether. Pace yourself - and perhaps stick to red wine. "[People tend to]



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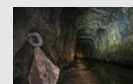
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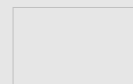
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drink red wine the most slowly, white wine a little more quickly because they want to drink it cold, and sparkling wine the fastest because it has a fantastic taste and goes down so easily," says Yu.

Splurge on the good stuff, not only because it's a celebration, but also because cheap alcohol tends to contain more congeners or impurities from the distillation process that cause killer hangovers.

If you are drinking and start to feel uncomfortable, tired or hot, you may want to try a folk remedy Yu picked up in his youth: have a glass of water with a pinch of salt and a pinch of sugar - and maybe a touch of vinegar or lemon juice. "That ought to wake you up," he says.

With all the eating and drinking, don't forget to exercise. Tan suggests incorporating a physical activity into festivities, such as a short hike before a meal. "Wake up a bit earlier and do some exercise outdoors," says Michal Bucek, a trainer with Hong Kong Bootcamp. "Use the stairs instead of lifts. Even a 20 to 30 minute walk helps."

Bucek recommends an easy exercise routine that works out the whole body, requires no equipment and takes only 30 minutes a day.

"Stick to basic exercises such as push-ups, sit-ups, lunges, squats, and some core exercises like planks. Do five to 15 repetitions for each exercise, and three sets of the circuit," says Bucek.

Don't sweat the season

Perhaps the most serious traps of the season are emotional. A 2004 study published in *Psychological Reports* found that homicide rates in the US went up on Christmas Day, and during Thanksgiving, New Year's Eve and, in particular, on New Year's Day. (The study also found suicide rates were generally lower on these days except on New Year's Day.)

Some experts have also coined the "Merry Christmas coronary" and "Happy New Year heart attack" to describe the phenomenon of increased cardiac deaths during the winter holiday season.

University of California-San Diego scientists studied 53 million US death certificates from 1973 to 2001. They found a spike in daily mortality during the Christmas and New Year's holiday period for both cardiac and non-cardiac diseases.

The study, published in 2004 in *Circulation*, showed that the jump in holiday mortality was growing proportionately larger over time.

In Hong Kong, Dr Duncan Ho Hung-kwong, a specialist in cardiology at the Hong Kong Sanatorium and Hospital, says

he certainly sees more heart attacks around the holidays than any other time of the year.

The exact mechanisms for this link are not determined, but experts believe it could be due to a combination of factors: changes in diet and alcohol consumption; weight gain and increased salt intake; emotional stress from family, finances and travelling; respiratory issues from burning wood in fireplaces; and holiday induced delays in seeking medical care.

The biggest culprit by far, Ho says, is stress. "We are definitely busier, and if we have a lot of stress or a lot of work, the heart pumps faster. If there is stress, cholesterol plaque can rupture, causing a blood clot, and block the artery totally."

If you are at an increased risk of heart trouble, take special care. People with atrial fibrillation - a common and potentially dangerous form of heart palpitations - have almost a 4½ times greater chance of having an episode if they are consuming alcohol, according to a study published in August in the *American Journal of Cardiology*.

There are easy ways to manage your stress levels at home. Taking a 20-minute power nap is one, says Peter Yeung, an acupuncturist and Chinese medicine practitioner. "Even if you can't sleep, just lie down. But make sure it's for less than an hour or else you may ruin your sleep cycle." Try also drinking tea, especially green tea or chrysanthemum tea, he says. It can help you relax, and aids digestion.

Dr Cindy Chiu Pui-yu, clinical assistant professor at University of Hong Kong's department of psychiatry, says managing expectations is key to a stress-free season. "We feel we're supposed to be happy and have a good time when surrounded by family and friends, but that reality doesn't really apply to everyone," she says.

"If you don't have family, or you just went through a break-up, it's not the end of the world."

Don't get hung up on perfection. It doesn't matter if things don't work out flawlessly. If you're alone, make plans that will get you out of the house doing things with other people. "Focus on the altruistic aspects of the holidays," says Chiu. "Volunteer to help the less fortunate."

To avoid flaring family tensions, don't bring up long-term chronic disputes or conflicts during this time, she says. Plan only a short exposure to each other. Have dinner, rather than stay together for several days. "Every family has its fair share of issues. You don't have to be perfect. At the end of the day the most important thing is to be there together."

If you do get angry, take a deep breath and count to five.

Also, try and get a good night's sleep. When you are rested, you are less stressed, more active, happier, and less liable to binge and get drunk. Merry Christmas!

*This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as:
Your holiday survival guide*

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