Making health a holiday tradition, any time of year

By Kim Krisberg

Holidays are a time for reunion and celebration, for making new memories and honoring old ones. And while they're often a chance to relax and take it easy, holidays can also be busy and stressful — sometimes they're the perfect excuse to cut a few corners and take a break from healthy habits. Luckily, there are some easy ways to make good health and well-being part of your holiday tradition.

No matter the time of year or your holiday destination, make sure safety and health are among your traveling companions.

"I would recommend, even for domestic travelers, that they always carry a travel health kit with some first aid items as well as anything they typically like to take for minor illnesses," says Phyllis Kozarsky, a travel health consultant at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "There's nothing more uncomfortable or annoying than being in a hotel or at someone's home and wanting a decongestant, an Advil or antacid and not having it with you."

If your holiday travel means a long plane ride, "Make sure to get up occasionally and walk around or exercise your calf muscles and stretch your legs while you're sitting," Kozarsky says. If you're going by car, don't forget to fasten your seat belt — the safety device saves more than 11,000 lives every year.

Of course, diseases are always on the move, whether it's holiday time or not. One of your best bets for fending off illness is to keep in the mind the importance of proper hand-washing and even throwing a small bottle of hand sanitizer into your travel kit. And take extra precautions during flu season.

"The best way to protect yourself from the flu is to get a flu vaccine," Kozarsky says. "If you think you have the flu, or otherwise feel ill, delay your travel plans until your fever has been gone for at least 24 hours."

Holiday hassles

Travel delays, party preparations — it's a lot to add to our already busy schedules. And it's OK to admit that holidays come with all types of emotional, physical and financial stressors that can impact our health, says Daniel Kirsch, a neuroscientist and president of the American Institute of Stress.

"You can literally worry yourself to death," says Kirsch about the array of negative effects stress has on the body, such as increasing a person's heart rate and blood pressure. However, there are some practical ways to relieve stress and build up your body's resilience, he says.

For instance, "If you're worried about spending money, then don't. Make cards or gifts — talk to people from your heart instead of from your wallet," Kirsch says. Consider learning some breathing exercises — "everyone can do them, they're free, easy, quick and amazingly effective," he says. Here's an example Kirsch calls a "quieting response:" As soon as you feel stressed, smile slightly to relax the face muscles, take a deep breath in and visualize warm air coming in through the bottoms of your feet, traveling up your legs and filling up your lungs. Then slowly exhale, visualizing the breath leaving your body in the same fashion. It's a quick relaxation exercise that can help you relax "from head to toe in six seconds," he says.

Festive feasting

A 2000 study found that we don't gain nearly as much weight during the fall and winter holiday season as we think we do. But we do gain a little — on average, less than a pound — and we tend to keep that extra weight on, which means that a little weight can start to add up over the years. Fortunately, holiday eating doesn't have to pack on extra pounds.

For example, if you're heading to a holiday party, eat a light snack, such as a piece of fruit, before you go to help curb your appetite, CDC advises. If your family is gathered around the TV for a holiday game, put snacks in a small bowl instead of eating out of the package. And don't forget to balance out a celebratory meal with some physical activity, such as a brisk walk before or after eating.

Beyond calories, make sure your holiday meals don't include an uninvited guest — foodborne illness. According to the U.S. Food Safety and Inspection Service, hot or cold food should not sit at room temperature for more than two hours. Instead, replace the servings often or use warming trays or ice to keep foods at proper temperatures. Always serve food on fresh plates and use a food thermometer to make sure meats are cooked.

>> For more tips for healthy, stress-free holidays, visit www.cdc.gov/family/holiday

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