

**- Holidays**

## How to keep healthy habits during the festive season

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Our brains welcome a pleasure upgrade — ice cream on Sundays, a decadent mid-week dinner, or a glass or two of wine on a Saturday night. But our bodies have a threshold for indulgence — a limit or a level it reaches until something's got to give. The festive season is upon us but we are just not wired to withstand unbridled partying and late nights. December is about relaxing and creating space to put yourself first. No doubt, you've been too busy to do an annual health check so while the clinics and pharmacies are quieter, schedule a set of health screenings and preventive tests including blood pressure, glucose, cholesterol and a weight assessment.

January is the time to set your mark. If you are a runner or cyclist, sign up for a running or cycling race early in the year to motivate you to keep up the pace during the festive season. It's like "tricking" your brain into reminding yourself that all the work you're putting in is not worth tossing out for a few moments on the lips or on the couch. No one expects you to hit the gym with the same vigour and determination you exercised during the year. And it's important to take a break of sorts, so why not switch things up. If you can't get to the gym, try a parkrun, online fitness activities or go for a swim at the beach or at a public pool. It's great for socialising and can be a fun day out for the whole family.

Physical activity is not only about training, it's also about embedding movement into your day and reducing sedentary time.

Use the time to find something you actually enjoy doing. It could be grabbing a cup of coffee and taking a walk with a friend instead of sitting down in the coffee shop. A breath of fresh air and lively conversation makes for a better and longer-lasting endorphin booster. To quote Albert Einstein, to keep your balance, you must keep moving.

It's easy to fall into the "life is short" trap when you're celebrating. Life is short. In the late 1970s, holiday heart syndrome was identified in healthy people without heart disease, who experienced acute cardiac rhythm disturbance after excessive or binge drinking. Binge drinking can lead to harmful behaviour and is detrimental to your health. If you're out with friends, be mindful of your intake of alcoholic beverages.

During the year, your mind is on other things and time can fly by without you being fully present, even in the company of friends and family. Social interaction not only keeps your mind agile by stimulating your memory and cognitive function, it also feeds your soul.

Social ties are not only important for your wellbeing, they also influence healthy behaviour. Being part of a religious group, running or book club instils a sense of responsibility for others. We form attachments and concerns for others that can lead our peers to continue behaviours that protect their health as well as ours — because we feel a level of accountability towards others. My accountability partner is my eight-year-old son; I share my plans and goals with him so that he can help keep me honest.

Eating in community or breaking bread together is one of the most symbolic ways of meaningful connection. The idea is not to deprive yourself but rather to moderate. I use the Diabetes Plate Method recommended by the American Diabetes Association to plan my meals. That way I don't miss out on the yummy treats. So, I'll have a slice of pizza with half a plate of salad or vegetables.

Remember to chew slowly, practice portion control, and try to stick to your regular eating times as much as possible. Eating out of your normal routine or when you're bored over the holiday period makes it difficult to keep track of what you're ingesting, and the last thing you want is to emerge from the holidays full of regret – and with extra kilos you'll spend well into the new year struggling to shift.