Surgeon General's Perspectives

HOLIDAY SEASON STRESS FREE

Boris D. Lushniak, MD, MPH
RADM, U.S. Public Health Service
Acting Surgeon General

The holidays allow for celebration and reflection on another year gone by, as well as the excitement and anticipation of a new one ahead. For some of us, they provide much-needed time off from work or school and reunite family members with loved ones. For others, workloads increase and long-awaited reunions might not meet expectations.

As much as people may view the holidays with fondness, they are often filled with stress. Whether it comes from entertaining guests, coping with loneliness, lacking the money to buy gifts, or feeling social pressure to spend more money than is comfortable, stress is a very real concern for many people as the holiday season approaches.

The winter season can also bring on other health concerns. Seasonal affective disorder (aptly called SAD) is a real health issue that is caused by a lack of sunlight. The lack of light affects the body's internal clock and circadian rhythms, resulting in hopelessness, increased appetite with weight gain (conversely, weight loss is more common with other forms of depression), increased sleep (conversely, too little sleep is more common with other forms of depression), less energy and ability to concentrate, loss of interest in work or other activities, sluggish movement, social withdrawal, unhappiness, and irritability.[1,2]

It is estimated that up to 10% of people are affected by SAD during the winter months in places with the least sunlight.[2] SAD is a serious depressive condition that can be improved with light therapy. However, milder winter blues are more common and may contribute to the anxiety and worry surrounding the holiday season.

Stress has a significant impact on our bodies. Chronic stress often leads to headaches, irritability, trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, cardiovascular disease, digestive problems, back pain, and a number of other unpleasant side effects.[3] Stress also weakens the immune system, increasing the likelihood of getting an infection such as influenza or strep throat.[4]

It can be easy around the holidays to neglect self-care, but it is important to take care of oneself during stressful times. Most adults need seven to eight hours of sleep a night to function optimally, so it's important to make sure you get enough sleep.[5] Eating healthy is another way to take care of yourself during the holidays. It can be as simple as having a second helping of vegetables before dinner or not saving room for that extra cookie at dessert. Exercise can mean taking a walk around the neighborhood with your family to look at lights and decorations.

Alcohol and drugs are often used as coping mechanisms for stress.[4] However, drinking to excess on a particular occasion, especially when one seldom drinks, can trigger cardiac abnormalities. The problem is nicknamed "holiday heart syndrome" because people who don't usually drink may consume too much alcohol during the holiday season.[6] Instead of drinking to cope with stress, try using relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, guided imagery, and yoga.[7]

The holidays are also a time when many people make a commitment to improve their health. I encourage people to take time during the holidays to talk about family health history and learn about mental health conditions that exist in their family. Indeed, since 2004, the Office of the Surgeon General has declared Thanksgiving to be National Family Health History Day. If you don't know where to start, use the My Family Health Portrait tool at www.surgeongeneral.gov.[8] Increasing one's knowledge now can be an important

way to improve health down the line and significantly reduce stress.

There are so many things you can do this season to stay healthy, cope with stress, and enjoy the holidays, but getting lots of sleep, eating nutritious foods, and exercising regularly are the simplest steps toward healthy living.[3]

I wish you all a happy, safe, and healthy holiday season.

Boris D. Lushniak, MD, MPH
RADM, U.S. Public Health Service
Acting Surgeon General

The author thanks Edward Grom, medical student, Harvard Medical School, and a summer 2013 intern at the Office of the Surgeon General, for his contributions to this article.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-days-a-year National Helpline in English and Spanish for individuals and family members facing substance abuse and mental health issues. Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for information or visit the online treatment locator site at http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov. SAMHSA also provides a suicide prevention lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK(8255.)

REFERENCES

1. PubMed Health. Seasonal affective disorder [cited 2013 Aug 21]. Available from: URL: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002499
2. National Institutes of Health (US). Beat the winter blues: shedding light on seasonal sadness. News in Health January 2013 [cited 2013 Aug 21]. Available from: URL: http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/issue/Jan2013/feature1
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US). CDC features: managing stress [cited 2013 Aug 21]. Available from: URL: http://www.cdc.gov/Features/HandlingStress
4. National Institutes of Health (US), National Institute of Mental Health. Fact sheet on stress [cited 2013 Aug 21]. Available from: URL: http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US). Sleep and sleep disorders: how much sleep do I need? [cited 2013 Aug 23]. Available from: URL: http://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about_sleep/how_much_sleep.htm
6. Menz V, Grimm W, Hoffmann J, Maisch B. Alcohol and rhythm disturbance: the holiday heart syndrome. Herz 1996;21:227-31.
7. National Institutes of Health, National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. Relaxation techniques for health: an introduction [cited 2013 Aug 21]. Available from: URL: http://nccam.nih.gov/health/stress/relaxation.htm
8. Surgeon General (US). Family health history: My Family Health Portrait tool [cited 2013 Aug 21]. Available from: URL: http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/initiatives/family-health-history