

Winter and Holiday Season Health and Wellness

The winter season can be a magical time of year that fosters memories and traditions that continue for generations. The winter holidays are for many of us a time of love and laughter, family and friends, festivity and celebration. Gathering with family and friends gives us comfort and kindles our inner light to grow.

With enthusiasm to fit it all in and make everything perfect, it is easy to get caught up in overbooking, overextending, overspending, and overindulging. Colds and flus also become more common during the winter months as we spend more time indoors in close proximity to one another. The cool, dry weather allows viruses to live longer and may decrease our natural defense mechanisms. The physical & emotional demands of the holiday season can also wear down our immune system.

Holistic Health: Our mind, body, and spirit are interconnected

Our physical health, our mental and emotional well-being, and our social relationships are all intricately related and inter-dependent. Below, we have provided some tips and reminders for staying healthy this winter and holiday season, keeping this holistic approach in mind.

Practice gratitude: the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself

Practicing gratitude has positive effects on health and happiness while improving sleep and decreasing the negative effects of materialism. The more gratitude is practiced, the easier it becomes until it becomes habit, and it may just be contagious.

The word “gratitude” is often thought of during traditional winter holiday practices with gift-giving, gathering with loved ones, feasting, singing carols, and offering charitable donations. Here are some additional fun family exercises to increase your gratefulness:

- Write down your family values. Then make a daily or weekly list of what you are grateful for (you can also discuss it around the dinner table)
- Keep a daily journal by jotting down what you are grateful for
- Thank people verbally or write thank you cards
- Think about things you are grateful for and meditate or pray on gratitude

Spend time with those you love; Serve and care for one another

Taking care of one another and maintaining quality relationships with others decreases the negative effects of stress, supports immune functioning, and improves the physical health and well-being of yourself as well as those around you. This holiday season, take care of one another and cherish your time with family and friends. Also, consider serving others, including your family, your friends, and your community. Service is giving to others to make a difference in their lives, being helpful without being asked, and considering other’s needs to be just as important as your own.

Carve out time for sleep and exercise

Exercising often drops off in the winter, which may reduce your body’s strength to fight off infections and manage stress. Integrating just a few minutes of physical activity here and there can make a big difference. Play tag with the kids, throw a football around, take a family walk, practice yoga, take the stairs, park at the far-end of a parking lot.

Also, don’t forget how restorative sleep is when you are making all those exceptions to the bedtime routine over the holidays. Preschoolers need between 10-13 hours, school-age kids need 9-12 hours, and adults need 7-9 hours. Do small things to maintain a daily bedtime rhythm with your kids over the break, such as including a simple bedtime verse each night:

*Now the sun has gone to bed. The stars are shining overhead.
In their nests the birds all sleep. Into their homes, the animals creep.
Children now no more will roam. It’s bedtime now. We’re safe at home.*

Get outside and let the sunshine inside

Being outside and soaking in the sunshine is a great way to exercise and is essential to maintaining joy during the shorter days of winter. During the winter, we need more sunshine to make vitamin D (a vitamin which supports the immune system) because the sun is not as intense, and we cover more of our skin with clothing. A recent study published in the journal *Microbiome* also found that rooms exposed to sunlight had fewer germs than rooms without sun exposure. So, open those curtains and let the sunlight in!

Eat a nutritious diet

Our immune system is influenced by our dietary intake. Here are a few tips for eating a nutritious diet to promote health and well-being.

- **Food first.** Food is the best source of all nutrients. If you're concerned about getting enough of a certain nutrient, turn to food sources before taking supplements. Foods contain phytochemicals (compounds that have healthy properties) that aren't found in supplements. Also, be sure not to use supplements as an excuse to eat poorly.
- **Eat the rainbow.** A simple way to ensure you're consuming an adequate diet is to eat fruits and vegetables of all colors: red, orange/yellow, green, blue/purple, brown/white (like garlic and bananas). When evaluating your diet, don't just look at your intake for a single day, but consider your average intake over several days.
- **Stay hydrated and drink water.**
- **What about all the holiday pies and Christmas cookies?** Eating processed food, junk food, or foods high in added sugar can increase inflammation in the body and compromise the immune system, making it harder to fight off germs. As with any holiday, moderation is key. Enjoy the holiday, the food, and the company. Don't feel guilty. Keep that rainbow of foods available. It's easy to munch on fruits and veggies when they are readily available during snacks and meals.

Practice cold and flu-prevention habits

- Wash your hands before eating and after coming inside from running errands or outside play. The best method for cleaning your hands is to wash with regular hand soap and water. Teach the whole family how to wash hands effectively (see insert).
- Teach your kids to cover their cough with the crook of their elbow.
- Talk to your doctor about getting the flu vaccine for the whole family. If you have concerns about the safety or efficacy of the vaccine, have an honest conversation with your pediatrician, family doctor, or trusted health care provider.
- Stay home and rest if you are sick. If your child has a fever, be sure the fever has subsided without medication for 24 hours before returning to school or regular activities. Listen to your body and rest if you need and teach your kids to do the same. Adequate rest and time-off will allow for a quicker recovery time and prevent spreading germs to others.

The winter season is a perfect time to take a breath and refocus on the values we hold dear to our hearts. Take time to nourish yourself, find balance, be present, savor the time with your loved ones, and practice gratitude.

The Seaside PTO Health + Wellness Committee
wish you all a joyful and peaceful winter break and holiday season.

*The gift of light we thankfully take
But shall it not be alone, for our sake.
The more we give light, the one to the other
It shines and it spreads and it glows still further,
Until every spark by friends set aflame,
Until every heart with joy to proclaim.
In the depths of our souls,
A shining sun glows.*