

Holiday Health Check

UC San Diego Health System Experts Recommend a Cup of Reason for Sampling the Season

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From overeating to exercise and alcohol, UC San Diego Health System nutritionists, trauma specialists and poison experts offer insights for a healthy holiday.

Food for Thought

The holidays make it so easy to overeat. Hanukkah celebrations kick off with Auntie's latkes. Grandma's sweet potatoes are a Christmas tradition. And then we wash it all down with one of Dad's annual eggnog creations. Sound familiar? UC San Diego Health System nutrition experts say "Savor the seasonal offerings-just do it sensibly." "Being healthy doesn't have to be boring," said Cheryl Rock, PhD, RD, professor of Family and Preventive Medicine at UCSD School of Medicine. "Include seasonal veggies in your meals and holiday dishes. Items such as squash, pumpkin and apples add flavor and interest to salads and baked goods, and they're good for you."

Santiago Horgan, MD, director for the Center for the Treatment of Obesity points out that using time off from work during the holidays to exercise is a great way to get a head start on New Year resolutions. "Gyms are usually not crowded this time of year."

Plan ahead before you go to a party. Eat a sensible snack, such as an apple, to curb your hunger so that you are not overly hungry when faced with fattening food.

Sip sparkling water- it's filling and hydrating.

Keep emotional eating in check. Are you really hungry, or did you grab that handful of cookies because shopping is stressful?

Think about and control your portions by using a salad-sized plate for your entree and side dishes. Eat a salad on an entree-sized plate before the main meal.

Recognize when you're full. It takes a good 20 minutes before your stomach signals you brain that it's full, so eat slowly, and the second you start feeling satisfied, stop eating.

Reduce the amount of fat in holiday meals. For example, use fat-free chicken broth or low-fat milk instead of butter when you prepare mashed potatoes. When sautéing celery and onions for the stuffing, use non-stick spray in the pan.

Designate a Driver If you are planning to drink alcohol, plan to have a responsible adult driver who has committed to NOT drinking. Many holiday accidents can be completely avoided by designating a driver.

"Our trauma center admits more than 2,400 patients a year who require a Trauma Team Activation and often, those accidents can be prevented, including drunk driving," explained Raul Coimbra, MD, PhD, professor of surgery and director, UC San Diego Division of Trauma, Burns and Critical Care. "Unintentional injury kills more people between the ages of one and 44 than any other disease or illness. Education is the key to stopping the spread of the disease known as trauma."

Seasonal Plants

The season is also filled with gorgeous decorations, plants and products usually not seen or available during the first 10 months of the year. "Unfortunately, this accounts for many problems during the holiday season," said Lee Cantrell, PharmD, director of the California Poison Control System, San Diego Division, at UC San Diego Medical Center. "These unusual additions may pose a problem for curious pets and young children. For example, most people don't know that all parts of mistletoe are toxic, and the berries may cause poisoning in children."

Mistletoe is toxic.

The leaves, and especially the berries, of English Holly are toxic. Ingestion of 20 or 30 berries can cause very serious poisoning.

Some seasonal nontoxic plants include Pyracantha, Eugenia and California Holly.

Poinsettias are essentially nontoxic, but can cause stomach upset if ingested, and the milky sap can cause skin irritation.

Christmas cactus and pine cones are also nontoxic.

Christmas trees such as pines, spruces and junipers may cause stomach upset if large amounts are ingested. Ingestion of small amounts may cause a localized irritation of the mouth.

Dos & Don'ts of Decorating

Some holiday decorations may be dangerous. Carefully hang glass bulbs and light bulbs high on the tree to prevent accidents.

Angel hair, or spun glass, is very irritating to the skin and eyes.

Ornaments imported from other countries may be painted with a lead paint and could be toxic if ingested.

Tinsel manufactured prior to 1972 also contains lead; however, the major problem with ingestion of large amounts of tinsel is obstruction of the gastrointestinal tract.

Toys and Tots

Toy related injuries peak during the holidays. Parents should carefully review the toys on their child's wish-list and consider the responsibility level of the child.

Small toys which break easily may be swallowed by small children and pets and cause serious injuries.

Potentially dangerous items such as darts, slingshots and BB guns can cause injury and loss of sight, especially during the excitement of holidays.

Additionally, small batteries - used in watches, cameras and calculators - can be quite dangerous if swallowed. They may cause burns or may leak chemicals that cause poisoning.

Decking the Halls with Alcohol?

In addition to designating a driver, Cantrell pointed out that alcohol poisoning - though common in children throughout the year - increases during the holidays. "Children are very sensitive to alcohol, especially to its ability to lower blood sugar."

Adults should make sure alcoholic drinks are cleaned up and out of reach during and after a party.

Colognes, perfumes and after-shave contain heavy concentrations of alcohol. Small children might ingest these products by mistake if they are attractively packaged.

If an ingestion of a questionable product occurs or you have questions about the potential toxicity of anything in your home, call the **California Poison Control System, San Diego Division, at UC San Diego Medical Center, toll free at 1-800-222-1222**. The Poison Control System offers a 24-hour-a-day information service on the toxicology, clinical signs and symptoms, assessment and treatment of exposures to toxic substances.

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