**Less Stress & More Relaxation During the Holidays**

**By Dr. Alyssa Musgrove**

The holidays are supposed to be one of the most cheerful times of the year, but they can also be fraught with anxiety, grief and stress.

Planning and attending parties, visiting family and friends, having family come visit (sometimes for too long), having to shop for MORE groceries, and having to cook MORE food (not to mention the over-abundance of sweets and desserts) all help to ratchet up stress levels. Financial pressures also tend to peak at this time of year -- worries over having enough money to purchase gifts and take time off of work.

To handle stress, many people turn to food -- especially sweets -- and then feel guilty for what they consumed. This guilt then increases their stress, and it becomes a vicious cycle that can be challenging to break. It’s no wonder the holiday season is a time of increased illness, since stress and sweets cause a major decrease in immune system function.

If the impending holidays are already causing feelings of overwhelm and stress, try implementing some of the following suggestions:

**Exercise**
Exercise affects a neurotransmitter that has an antidepressant-like effect on your brain, while helping to decrease muscle tension. Start your day with exercise. Go for a brisk walk on Thanksgiving morning, when you are feeling anxious or to relieve stress after your company leaves. After your meal, invite visiting family and friends to go for a walk. Not only will you burn off some of the calories you consumed, but you’ll burn off some of that holiday stress, as well.

**Spend Time in Nature**Just five minutes in nature can help reduce stress and boost your mood, helping you to relax!
 **Take a Break**Taking a short 10-minute break to sit quietly and shut out the chaos around you can trigger a relaxation response. Meditating during your breaks can help you redirect your mind to silence and decrease feelings of stress and anxiety even more. Turn off your racing mind and simply focus on the present moment and task at hand. Avoid worrying about what you need to do later in the day or tomorrow. If you have trouble shutting out such thoughts, jot them down on a piece of paper to help clear your mind and assure your brain you will remember and get to the task eventually.

**Drink Up**Ideally our body should be about 70 percent water. However, research shows many people are only 40-50 percent water. This dehydration causes decreased metabolism and increases inflammation in the body. Drinking water decreases inflammation, helps improve weight loss by reducing cravings and helps body systems work more efficiently. Shoot for 64 ounces of water a day – the equivalent of four 16-ounce bottles. Start with 16 ounces when you first get up. Have another 16 ounces 30 minutes to an hour before lunch, and 16 ounces before dinner. Make sure not to drink more than 4-6 ounces with meals so you don’t dilute your stomach acids and decrease your ability to digest your foods.

**Focus on Fiber**Fiber reduces cravings, and helps improve your metabolism and ability to lose fat. Fiber foods help fill you up and feel more satisfied with less food. Reach for raw unsalted nuts, vegetables, berries, legumes and hummus.

**Mindful Eating**
Chew slowly, at least 20 times per bite. This improves digestion and allows you to feel full and satisfied with less food.

**Don’t skip the most important meal**
It is so easy to get in a hurry during the holidays with all the preparations that need to be done. Many people will drink their coffee and fail to eat breakfast, or they will rationalize skipping breakfast because they are “saving calories” for the big meal later in the day. Both of these choices harm more than help by creating imbalanced blood sugar, which leads to cravings, irritability and decreased ability to deal with stress. You don’t have to eat a big breakfast, just a couple boiled eggs will give you a serving of protein and fat to get your metabolism going.

**Practice Moderation**
The holidays are a special time to enjoy yourself. It is okay to splurge every now and then. Eat the foods you enjoy in small portions. If you eat well 80 percent of the time, then you can have foods considered “treats” 20 percent of the time.

**Bring a Side**
If you are preparing the meal or bringing a dish, make something that goes along with your nutritional needs, such as a green salad loaded with vegetables. By doing this, you will be sure you have a healthy option when sitting down at the table.

**Be grateful**
Express your gratitude to those you gather with this holiday season. Go around the table and have each person share one thing for which they are grateful. When we focus on the meaning of the season, we reduce our stress and increase our joy and optimism. Keep a gratitude journal and write down why you are grateful each day. Focus on what you do have this holiday instead of what you don’t.

Have a healthy and happy holiday!