**How to Decrease the Stress of the Holidays**

**By Dr. Ramona Warren**

A recent article said personal stress worldwide is at the highest levels since the middle of World War II, a time when personal stress had been at its peak. Today suicide has replaced car accidents as the No. 1 cause of injury death in America. The top causes of stress are work, money, relationships, media overload, health, poor diet, lack of sleep, and the holiday season.

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 overabundance of sweets and desserts) all help to ratchet up stress levels. 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 the immune system.

Here are some simple steps you can take to help enjoy the holidays without the guilt and the stress:

1. Start your day with exercise. Go for a brisk walk on Thanksgiving morning. After your meal, go out again with the family and friends you have just eaten with. Not only will you burn off some of the calories you consumed, but exercise is also a very natural and healthy form of stress relief.
2. Don’t skip breakfast. 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 “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. Something as simple as a good quality protein shake will help keep your blood sugar balanced. Add some fiber to the shake, such as flax seed or chia seed, to get double the benefits.
3. Drink Up. Ideally our body should be about 70% water. However, research shows that many people are only 40-50% 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.
4. Eat more fiber. Fiber reduces cravings, and helps improve your metabolism and ability to lose fat. Focus on raw unsalted nuts, vegetables, berries, legumes and hummus. Fiber foods help fill you up and feel more satisfied with less food.
5. Eat the foods you enjoy in small portions. It is okay to splurge every now and then. Typically I tell my patients if they eat well 80 percent of the time, then they can have foods considered “treats” 20 percent of the time. The holidays are a special time to enjoy yourself. Just remember the key word: moderation.
6. Start with healthier foods. Begin filling your plate with protein and vegetables and you will have less room for calorie-filled casseroles -- especially the sweet potato casserole.
7. Mindful eating. Focus on the food you are eating, give thanks for it and savor each bite. Chew slowly, at least 20 times per bite. This improves digestion and allows you to feel full and satisfied with less food. Also, taking deep, full breaths to help calm you during the meal will help you enjoy the food and the company you are with.
8. If you are preparing the meal or bringing a dish, make something that goes along with your nutritional needs. I am known in my family for bringing a green salad loaded with all kinds of vegetables. By doing this, I know I will have something healthy to eat. All I have to do is add a lean meat, and I have a very healthy meal.
9. After the meal is served, clear the table and immediately put food away and pack leftovers to be sent home with guests. This reduces the temptation to overeat by nibbling or grazing and also reduces the risk of food spoiling.
10. Be grateful. Express your gratitude to those you gather with this Thanksgiving. Perhaps 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.

Have a healthy and happy holiday!