

HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO YOU

Mood-Boosting Health Tips

by Kim Childs



Happy though they can be, the holidays can leave some folks feeling overstuffed, overcommitted and especially in colder regions, grappling with winter blues. The good news is that the holiday season can be a happier and healthier time with a few strategies, supplements and herbs in hand.

Eat, Drink... and be Mindful

"Many of us get down during the dark winter months, so we fight the darkness with festivities and foods that we think will pick us up," says nutritionist Judith Mabel, Ph.D., of Brookline, Massachusetts. "But most holiday foods don't succeed because like alcohol, they bring your mood up briefly and then bring it down."

During the holidays, Mabel advises her clients to keep exercising for better brain function and mood, to avoid sugar when possible and to reduce hunger before parties by eating snacks like nuts, seeds, fruit and cheese or soup. "It's also important to eat a high-fiber, low-glycemic breakfast in the morning such as eggs, whole grain cereals or yogurt," adds Mabel. "That keeps you from consuming too many calories during the day."

Mabel recommends bringing healthy offerings to gatherings, like hum-

mus or eggplant dip with whole grain crackers or a platter of crudité's. "If you are going to splurge, dark chocolate that is at least 60 percent cocoa is a good choice," she says. "It can lower blood sugar and it has healthy flavonoids and theobromine, which is a mood booster. It does have some caffeine, however, so be aware if you are sensitive."

To counteract wintertime vitamin D deficiency, which is linked to depression and seasonal affective disorder (SAD), Mabel suggests Vitamin D₃ supplementation in the range of 1,000 to 2,000 IU daily. Fish oils and B vitamins also make her list of mood boosters year-round.

Herbal Help

When it comes to managing stressful situations, Bonnie Rogers, a clinical herbalist in Briarcliff, New York, recommends a natural approach to calm nerves. "Nettles help to balance the adrenals," she says. "It's a tonic herb that you could use every day of your life, and it delivers calcium to your system."

Rogers recommends covering ½ to ¾ cup of loose nettles with boiling water in a jar and letting the herbs "drink" a bit before topping them off with more boiling water. Allow the mixture to sit for at least four hours (or overnight) to release the vitamins and minerals, and

then strain the tea and drink it cold or hot, storing leftovers in the refrigerator. "In the winter, I add a tablespoon of elderberries, which are antiviral," says Rogers. "Sometimes I also add a quarter cup of oat straw, which helps to balance the nervous system; letting the mixture steep releases its magnesium, which relaxes the body."

Rose petal tea can be a quick fix for anxiety, notes Rogers, who also likes rose glycerite from a dropper bottle. "I often give my herbal students a drop without telling them what it is," Rogers reports. "When I ask them what it feels like, almost everybody says, 'I feel like my shoulders relaxed and my heart opened.'" Motherwort tincture is another aid for reducing anxiety, she adds, and skullcap helps with insomnia and racing thoughts.

For those coping with SAD but not on medication, Rogers suggests a combination of St. John's Wort and lemon balm. "A simple lemon balm tea is wonderfully relaxing, and it helps with digestion." Rogers adds that tulsi, the ayurvedic name for holy basil, also helps the body to manage stress and comes in tea bags for convenience.

Keep Sleep, Water on the Holiday List

Getting adequate sleep during the holidays is essential to fortifying the body and keeping the mind clear, says Dillan DiGiovanni, a certified holistic health coach in Somerville, Massachusetts. "It helps everything. More sleep equals greater energy and less need for caffeine and sugar."

DiGiovanni adds that a glass of warm water with lemon juice in the morning can lift fatigue and irritability, while cleansing the digestive organs. "Drinking at least 64 ounces of water a day helps with detoxification year-round," she says, "and it curbs appetite during a season of overindulgence." DiGiovanni further counsels people to limit alcohol, a depressant that disrupts sleep and dehydrates the body, and to guard against holiday overspending and overcommitting in the name of fun.

Kim Childs is a writer in Boston. Connect at KimChilds.com.