

Newsletter

December 2022

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Volume 6, Edition 12

RESPONDER WELLNESS



Keeping yourself healthy throughout the holidays

By Erik Bustillo

O2X Nutrition Specialist

Holidays have a way of bringing people together. They encourage giving, kindness, spending time with family and embracing friendships. This is a time of year when different cultural customs are on display and colorful bulbs light up houses and municipalities. It quite truly can be a wonderful time of the year.

While we often hear about laughter and joy, there are several common stressors associated with the holidays, including:

- Lack of money
- Pressure of giving gifts
- A sense of a lack of time
- Credit card/financial debt
- Physical health
- Eating
- Alcohol

[READ MORE ON PAGE 2](#)



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RESPONDER WELLNESS

Keeping yourself healthy throughout the holidays

Navigating nutrition around the holidays is often a stressor for the general population and for first responders alike. If you have ever served yourself a second or third plate without stopping to ask yourself if you are still hungry, you may have partaken in a mindless eating episode.



Imagine feeling the pressure of providing for yourself and for the people and pets you love. When you add the pressure to participate in the commercialized aspect of the holidays – which often involves spending money – your stress level can go up. This time of year should not be challenging to navigate when it comes to maintaining healthy habits. But it can be tricky.

Factors that can affect health

These stressors can have an impact on other aspects of your life. They can trigger unhealthy habits or behaviors developed in childhood or other places in your life.

This includes mindless eating (e.g., stress eating, eating out of boredom); relying on alcohol to unwind or as an “escape.” So, it is vital to become aware of these habits and tendencies because anything consumed in excess will eventually be bad.

Mindless Eating

Navigating nutrition around the holidays is often a stressor for the general population and for first responders alike. If you have ever served yourself a second or third plate without stopping to ask yourself if you are still hungry, you may have partaken in a mindless eating episode. This also happens when:

- You stare at the refrigerator out of boredom
- You go straight to the pantry after work out of habit
- Snack because “they are there”
- Eating in a group setting (i.e., a chow hall, family meal) because food is on the table

You may not be thinking about hunger levels and then later walk by the food and grab more because it is still sitting there.

One of the most important things you can do for yourself in this scenario is to increase your awareness of these tendencies. Like with anything related to food, excess is not good. The increased caloric intake can lead to increased body fat stores, which increases the risk of disease, diabetes, cancers and more.

Alcohol consumption

The same goes for alcohol. Many people use alcohol as a coping mechanism. This is true for first responders, as well. If you think about the societal encouragement of alcohol intake, it is easy to see how it has become an overused toxin. It’s not only socially accepted, but encouraged. Some common reasons people cite for drinking alcohol without thinking that can lead to excess consumption include:

- “I had a rough day, I need a drink!” or “What a great day, let’s celebrate with a drink!”
- “Happy Hour” revolves around drinking in social settings
- Drinking while cooking and then drinking more while eating
- Having a drink to wind down and get to sleep (this triggers poor sleep quality, by the way)

As mentioned earlier, the holidays can bring about feelings of sadness and loneliness. And this can

[*\(Continued on Page 3\)*](#)

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(Continued from Page 2)

exacerbate unmanaged excess alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a depressant. So while it can bring about a momentary lift in mood, that's followed by a "crash" in energy and mood. And that's where alcohol intake becomes a risk factor for people suffering from depression and thoughts of suicide, which is not uncommon during holidays.

What to do

A goal without a plan is just a wish. It is important to take action steps to ensure a safe and enjoyable holiday.

Some tips for self-care and in social situations include:

- Acknowledge how you feel, the first step is awareness
- Recognize that it is OK to talk with someone – whether family, friends, or a professional
- Make it a point to reach out to someone you care about. Connecting with people has many benefits, especially since we are social creatures
- Make time for yourself. Do things YOU enjoy as often as you can

The self-care component is important because it can have an impact on what and how you eat. The nutrition and alcohol management pieces are also vital for maintaining health throughout the holidays:

- Keep ultra-processed food to a minimum, but do not eliminate it completely. Know yourself. If over-restricting will cause over-indulgence, moderate your intake
- Don't let the holidays become a "free-for-all." Eat a healthy snack before holiday parties (a protein shake can do if you are pressed for time)
- When possible, make it a point to eat your normal diet 80% to 90% of the time
- Find alternatives to alcoholic beverages. Try adding lime to a seltzer water, drink a diet soda and stay physically active
- If drinking alcohol, practice moderation. Set a limit – for example, no more than 2 alcoholic beverages, twice a week – and stick to that plan.

Staying in control

The holidays do not have to be a free-for-all of overindulgence and feelings of loneliness. It is important to know that you are not alone. You are in control of your meals and what you do on a regular basis. Reach out to loved ones, practice self-care, remind yourself that it is ok to say NO and have a plan going into the holidays.

As a society, we have normalized the overconsumption of alcohol and of food. This can be the year to break that. Holidays can be a wonderful time of the year. With moderation and communication, you can be better prepared to enjoy them and save the day.

Erik Bustillo is an O2X Nutrition Specialist. He is a registered dietitian and current co-vice president of the International Society of Sports Nutrition (ISSN). Erik is also a certified sports nutritionist through the ISSN, a certified strength coach through the National Council on Strength & Fitness-NCSF, and a certified personal trainer through the National Strength and Conditioning Association – NSCA. He also specializes in reading and understanding blood/lab values that have a direct effect on human physiology and one's ability to perform. Several fields of expertise are energy improvement, performance recovery, weight loss, working with professional/elite athletes, stress management, inspirational communication, mindset, and habit change.

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