

**Splurge** - Volume 3 Issue 10 (October 2008)

Article by: Joseph P. Galichia, MD, FACC

*Interventional Cardiologist*

Galichia Medical Group, PA

316-684-3838 / 800-657-7250

www.galichia.com

## **MERRY and HEALTHY and HAPPY this Holiday Season TIPS on AVOIDING Overindulgence**

Medicine has its own myths and legends; phenomena medical staff routinely experience that go unproven but are accepted as truth. One such myth that has now been proven partially true is the “Holiday Heart Attack”: the higher occurrence of cardiac events, strokes, and other acute medical issues that end up with trips to the hospital in mid-to-late December. Studies now show that there truly is credence to this notion.

Many hypotheses have been suggested for this spike but the most recent studies suggest that despite the stress of holiday finances, the cold temperatures, and the family dynamics that may influence a person during these times, the most compelling reason for persons with heart disease to find themselves in life-and-death situations is due to a break in schedule and routine. Lots of patients are given advice to have an operation, or some diagnostic test – an angioplasty or even routine treadmill – and they make the decision to wait until after the holidays are over to get this work done. And then, what may have been routine, becomes a critical, life-threatening event.

In the interest of optimal health throughout the holidays (and throughout the year), try to keep to your medication regime as closely as possible; listen carefully to your doctor’s advice, especially when it comes to the timing of procedures, testing, and operations. Your friends and family want you happy, healthy, and celebrating with them for years to come, so don’t worry about ruining anyone’s fun if you need medical help.

### **Eating and Drinking Too Much: American Holiday Traditions**

In the United States, many of us go through a cycle over the holidays. Starting with Thanksgiving, we tend to eat and drink more than usual, unusually rich foods and heavy drinks, right up until January 1<sup>st</sup>, when we then make all the resolutions to undo what we just spent weeks doing to our minds and bodies! Many of our family traditions include rich foods, lots of alcoholic beverages, and banishing healthy exercise to the New Year’s resolution lists. The average American gains between 3-8 pounds over this period of time every year. As we age this weight tends to be harder and harder to lose, leading to heart disease and other health problems.

Overindulgence in food and alcohol can wreck an otherwise happy holiday. Here are some basic tips about drinking alcohol at the holidays:

- Eat before drinking. Drinking sugary alcohol not only provides the body with “empty” calories, but too much can disrupt sleep patterns, ruin your insulin balance, and put your body at risk of dehydration. Alcohol is full of empty calories, so watch the mixers.

- Try to drink water in between each cocktail or glass of wine, and drink in moderation. Avoid driving after drinking: either designate a non-drinking driver for the evening, or use a safe driver or taxi service. It could mean the difference between a merry holiday or tragedy.
- Stop when you feel you've had enough.

The last admonition for alcohol indulgence is where I begin with the tips for how to retain the healthy figure you've worked so hard for during the holidays. Even though you may see a buffet loaded with your favorite foods, proceed with caution, and listen to your body.

- Eat at regular times if you can, and forget about skipping meals. With holiday eating, you need a game plan, and this is the first step. If the big thanksgiving is in the evening, be sure to eat breakfast and lunch as you usually do. The key is routine; if you stick to your routine you will be less likely to stuff yourself when the time finally comes to set down for the feast.
- Keep your hands busy. Help cook, clean up the dishes, feed the kids, or get a plate for the elderly folks at the table. Make conversation and take the opportunity of breaking bread with family and friends to reconnect and get to know each other even better.
- Take a walk. If the day is conducive to walk at all, bundle up and stroll through the neighborhood. Winter in Kansas can be chilly, but lovely too. Say hi to a neighbor, give a special treat to your pets, and move a little.

If your loved ones are away, or you are planning on spending a holiday alone, explore volunteer opportunities. Compassion and kindness are always in style, and anytime you can share the blessing of your time, energy, and material goods with those in need, you are bound to feel more uplifted and less lonely too.

So, with my warmest regards, I hope you and yours have a safe, healthy holiday, full of mistletoe, merriment, and memory-making!

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