

Dealing with Christmas stress

By Mike DeCinti

Do you know that if you Google the words “stress and holidays” your search will yield about five million websites. The holidays are a stressful time, there’s no avoiding it. As one of the sites pointed out, if you have problems in or around your family the other 11 months of the year, what makes you think you’ll be fine during the holidays? You just have to learn to minimize your stress or deal with it in a better way.

According to research, one in five of us get stressed during the holidays. For some people it can also make existing problems seem even bigger and may actually emphasize how unhappy they are. Mental health group, The Samaritans, say its helpline advisers expect 10% more calls – around 100,000 – during the holiday period, and report that the suicide rate reaches its peak in January.

Now I know information like this is the printed equivalent to a big lump of coal in your stocking, but it’s important for you to know, not only for yourself, but maybe someone you know. So try to keep these things in mind as we get through the holiday season.

- Shopping for gifts may be one the most stressful activities you do so decide early how much you can afford to spend and stick to it. You don’t want to add bankruptcy to your list of holiday problems.
- Holiday parties are another area that often causes some people to get stressed out, worrying about what to wear, who to talk to and what to say. And although I can’t help you with those things I will tell you not to rely on alcohol to calm your nerves. Alcohol can often amplify your feelings and make the situation worse.
- Along those lines, be conscious of what you eat and drink. Not only will alcohol often cause more stress, but so will caffeine and tobacco. Limit the amounts of these items and when it comes to food, just remember moderation. You can always visit www.lrxray.com to read my article on tips for eating healthy during the holidays.
- Giving yourself time to relax is also very important. Exercise is a great stress reliever. Take a walk every day rather than staying indoors. Laughter can also relieve stress. And, if you really want to get away from it all, why not go abroad? Search the internet for the best deal and pack your bags.

So why is any of this important. Well every time you're confronted with stress whether it is a traffic jam, a bounced check, or the holidays, your body releases a cascade of stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. They, in turn, send signals to various parts of your body to ready them for action.

- For instance, your lungs expand, your heart beats faster, and your blood pressure rises. All of which can lead to common stress-related conditions ranging from chronic hypertension, gastric reflux and constipation, to depression, anxiety, and

fatigue.

- Stress can even make you fat. Cortisol is not only a powerful appetite trigger, but chronically high levels of cortisol actually stimulate the fat cells inside the abdomen to fill with more fat, creating a life-threatening form of fat called visceral fat, which puts you at higher risk for heart disease and diabetes.
- Stress also inflicts its damage on our immune system. If your body is releasing cortisol all the time, as it does under chronic stress, then your immune system is constantly being suppressed, increasing your risk of illness.

Whatever holiday you recognize, remember that this is supposed to be a time of celebration. Making it stress-free is just one more step to better mental and physical health. And as always, if you have any questions or concerns, please consult your healthcare provider.

Mike DeCinti is the marketing director for Lumberton Radiological Associates. He can be reached at mdecinti@lraxray.com or by calling 738-8222, ext. 258.