

# Your Health

 Health Partners

DECEMBER 2024 NEWSLETTER

## STAYING HEALTHY THROUGH THE FESTIVE SEASON

*Holiday Health &  
Seasonal Affective Disorder*



In this issue of *Your Health* we take an in depth look at staying healthy throughout the festive season, including diet, alcohol consumption, exercise and mental health. Plus, we have a focus on Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) – a form of recurrent depression, which occurs at the same time each year, usually in winter.

## Staying Healthy Over the Festive Season

As the festive lights twinkle and the scent of mulled wine fills the air, Christmas is the season for hearty meals, sweet treats and a packed social calendar. While there's much to enjoy, it's also a period when maintaining health and wellbeing can become a secondary concern, leading to overindulgence and stress. However, with some thoughtful planning and a balanced approach, you can savour the festive cheer without compromising your health. Here are some tips to keep you healthy during the Christmas season.

### MINDFUL EATING

For many, Christmas is associated with feasts and irresistible nibbles. While it's fine to enjoy your favourite festive foods, mindful eating practices can help you relish the flavours without going overboard:

- ▶ **Portion control:** Use smaller plates to naturally reduce portion sizes and avoid going back for seconds immediately. Give your body time to register fullness.
- ▶ **Balance your plate:** Fill half your plate with vegetables, a quarter with lean protein and the remaining quarter with carbohydrates to ensure a well-rounded meal.



- ▶ **Slow down:** Eat slowly and savour each bite, which can lead to better digestion and greater satisfaction with smaller quantities of food.
- ▶ See the [Association of UK Dietitians guide to mindful eating](#) for more information.

### HYDRATION AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

It's easy to forget how quickly the calories from alcohol can add up, not to mention the dehydration it can cause:

- ▶ **Stay hydrated:** Alternate each alcoholic drink with a glass of water to stay hydrated and help control the amount of alcohol you consume.
- ▶ **Choose wisely:** Opt for lighter beverages, such as a spritzer or light beer and be aware of the calorie content in creamy or sugary mixed drinks.

Remember, the UK Chief Medical Officer recommends that both men and women avoid regularly drinking more than 14 units of alcohol per week, in order to keep health risks from drinking to a low level, that's roughly six pints of beer or 10 small glasses of lower-strength wine. If you think you may have a problem with your alcohol intake, check out [Alcoholics Anonymous](#).

### SLEEP QUALITY

Late-night parties and disrupted routines can wreak havoc on your sleep schedule, which is vital for overall health:

- ▶ **Prioritise sleep:** Aim for seven to nine hours of quality sleep a night, even if it means leaving the party a little earlier.
- ▶ **Wind down:** Establish a relaxing bedtime routine to help signal to your body that it's time to sleep.

### MENTAL HEALTH

The holiday season can be a difficult time for many, with feelings of loneliness or loss heightened during this period:

- ▶ **Reach out:** If you're feeling down, don't hesitate to reach out to friends, family, or professional support networks.
- ▶ **Volunteer:** Giving back to the community can be a fulfilling way to lift your spirits and connect with others.

**STRESS MANAGEMENT**

The pressure to create the perfect Christmas experience can be overwhelming, leading to increased stress levels, which can have a negative impact on your health:

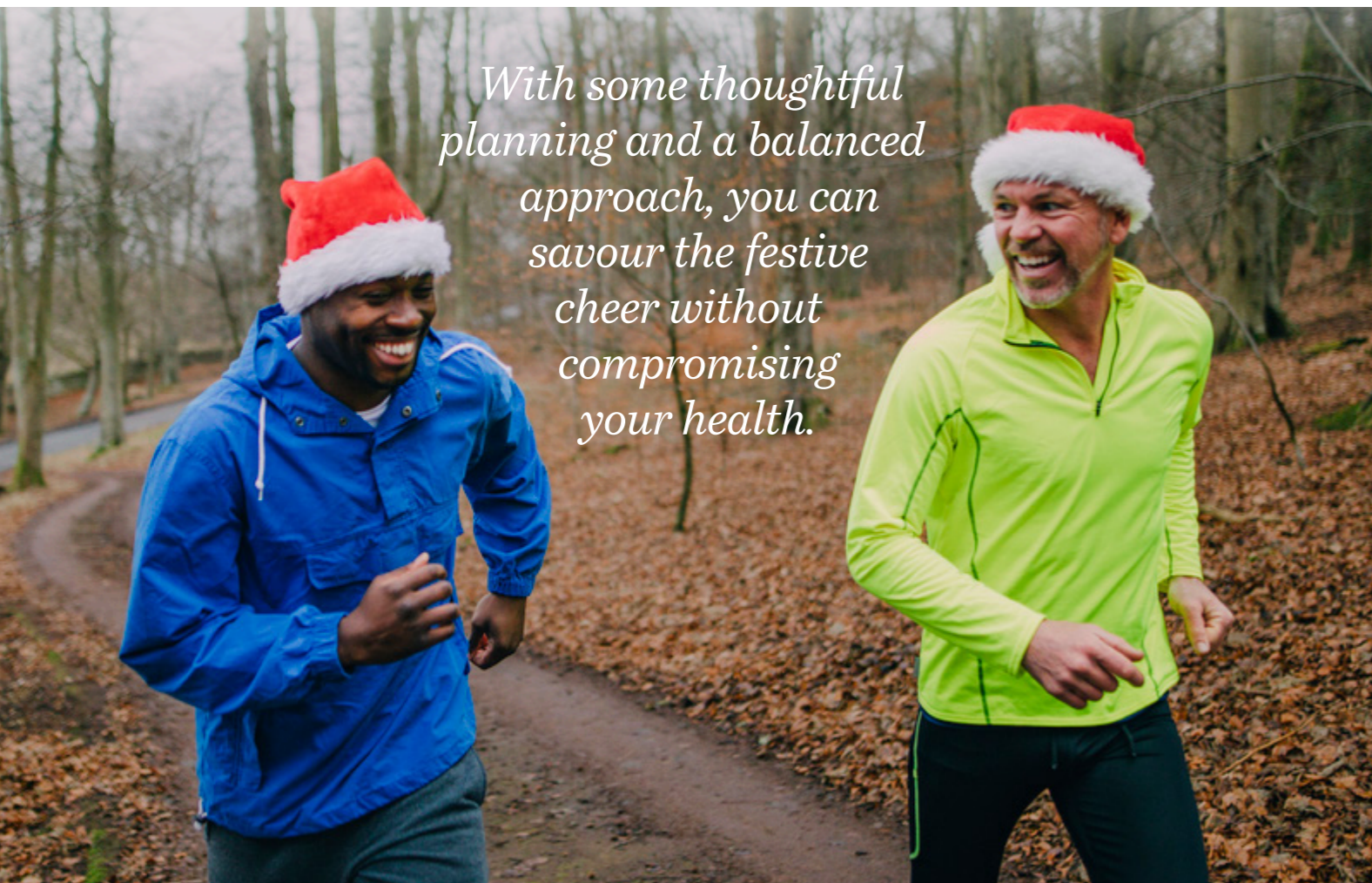
- ▶ Plan ahead: Organise your time and delegate tasks to avoid last-minute panics.
- ▶ Take breaks: Ensure you schedule some downtime to relax and recharge.
- ▶ Set realistic expectations: Remember, perfection isn't the goal; enjoying time with friends and family, if possible, is what truly matters. If this is not possible, there are many options for volunteering over Christmas.

**PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

The cold weather and a busy schedule can often lead to a drop in physical activity. Yet, exercise is crucial for balancing out those extra calories and for maintaining mental wellbeing:

- ▶ Stay active: Incorporate activity into your celebrations, such as a walk with family and friends.
- ▶ Routine: Stick to your regular exercise routine as much as possible or adapt it to fit the holiday schedule.

In conclusion, while Christmas is a time for celebration, it doesn't have to come at the expense of your health. By being mindful of your choices and incorporating healthy habits, you can enjoy the season while keeping your wellbeing at the forefront. So go ahead, raise a glass and toast to a happy and healthy festive season!



*Seasonal Affective Disorder*

Every year we experience the seasons changing, with fewer hours of sunlight and colder temperatures in the autumn and winter here in the UK. It's quite normal for people to feel more sluggish in the winter months, with more time spent indoors and the diminished daylight – but some people experience a predictably deeper sense of low mood during this time, which is known as Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD.

**WHAT IS SAD?**

SAD is a form of recurrent depression, which occurs at the same time each year, usually in winter, with symptoms lasting about four to five months per year. A less common form of the disorder causes depression during the summer months, beginning in the late spring or early summer and remitting in the autumn.



**WHAT CAUSES SAD?**

The exact cause is not fully understood. SAD has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain, prompted by shorter daylight hours and less sunlight in winter. SAD is more common in people living far from the equator, where there are fewer daylight hours in the winter.

SAD is three times more common in women than in men, and certain people may be more vulnerable to SAD as a result of their genes, as some cases appear to run in families. According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, approximately 3% of us will be so seriously affected by SAD that it will interfere with our everyday lives.



**SYMPTOMS OF SAD**

These include those symptoms associated with major depression and some specific symptoms that differ for winter-pattern and summer-pattern SAD. Some people just find the condition a bit irritating, while for others, it can be severe and have a significant impact on their day-to-day life.

SAD symptoms can include:

- ▶ A persistent low mood
- ▶ A loss of pleasure or interest in normal everyday activities
- ▶ Irritability
- ▶ Feelings of despair, guilt and worthlessness
- ▶ Feeling lethargic (lacking in energy) and sleepy during the day
- ▶ Sleeping for longer than normal and finding it hard to get up in the morning
- ▶ Use of drugs or alcohol for comfort
- ▶ Craving carbohydrates and gaining weight.

**HOW IS SAD TREATED?**

Treatment for SAD can be similar to that for depression, as well as some additional options and will depend on whether you experience winter or summer SAD. Treatment options include:

- ▶ Self-help
- ▶ Light therapy
- ▶ Talking therapy
- ▶ Antidepressant medications
- ▶ Vitamin D (which we usually absorb naturally through sunlight in warmer months) might be helpful, though there is no clear evidence of benefit.

**SELF-HELP**

There are a number of simple things you can try for winter SAD that may help improve your symptoms, including:

- ▶ Try to get as much natural sunlight as possible – even a brief lunchtime walk can be beneficial.
- ▶ Make your work and home environments as light and airy as possible.
- ▶ Sit near windows when you're indoors
- ▶ Consider a light box (further information below).
- ▶ Make sure you're getting enough sleep as it's essential for positive health and wellbeing.
- ▶ Cut down on alcohol and stimulants like caffeine and restrict screen time before bed.
- ▶ Eat a healthy, balanced diet.
- ▶ If possible, avoid stressful situations and take steps to manage stress. Relaxation tapes can be helpful.

**TALKING THERAPY**

A type of talking therapy known as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can be highly beneficial for people with seasonal depression. CBT is aimed at helping people learn how to cope with difficult situations. It can help to change negative patterns affecting how you think, feel and behave. It's an effective therapy for many types of mental health problems, including depression and anxiety.

**MEDICATION**

Some people with SAD benefit from antidepressant treatment, especially if symptoms are severe. Any medication that would make people more tired or sleepy should be avoided, so SSRI antidepressants are usually used. SSRI antidepressants work by increasing the amount of available serotonin in the brain to reduce SAD symptoms.

Antidepressants are thought to be most effective if taken at the start of winter before symptoms appear and continued until spring. Speak to your GP before stopping prescribed antidepressants.

*Try to get as much natural sunlight as possible – even a brief lunchtime walk can be beneficial.*

**LIGHT THERAPY**

Also called phototherapy, you sit a few feet from a special light box so that you're exposed to bright light within the first hour of waking up each day.

Light therapy mimics natural outdoor light and appears to cause a change in the brain chemicals linked to mood. The idea is to try to provide extra light and to make up for the shortage of daylight in winter. A light box is usually used for 30 minutes to an hour each day. Light therapy works quite quickly and, if it is going to help, most people will notice some improvement in the first week. However, the full effect may take three to six weeks to develop.

Fortunately, any side-effects are usually mild. They include headache, nausea or

blurred vision. It is usually best not to use a light box after 5.00 pm, because you may then find it hard to get to sleep.

However, exposure to very bright light may not be suitable if you:

- ▶ Have an eye condition or eye damage that makes your eyes particularly sensitive to light.
- ▶ Are taking medication that increases your sensitivity to light, such as certain antibiotics and antipsychotics, or the herbal supplement St John's Wort. Speak to your GP if you are unsure about the suitability of a particular product.

Dawn-simulating alarm clocks are also used. The device gradually increases the amount of light in your bedroom in the morning to simulate the rising sun and wake you up. The light gradually increases, just as natural sunlight does, over a period of 30 to 45 minutes. Instead of waking in darkness, you wake to what looks like a sunny morning. This can be helpful when it's hard to wake up on autumn and winter mornings.

**VITAMIN D**

Studies testing whether vitamin D is effective in SAD treatment have produced mixed findings, with some results indicating that it is as effective as light therapy, but others detecting no effect.

Vitamin D deficiency is common in the UK – estimated to be around 20%. We absorb vitamin D using sunlight and can ingest it from various food sources. To increase your vitamin D intake you might want to consider taking vitamin D supplements during the autumn and winter months, especially if you spend significant time indoors.

Taking 10mcg (400 IU) a day between October and early March may help to prevent vitamin D deficiency, particularly if you are darker skinned as you may be more susceptible to the lower levels of sunlight in the UK.

Foods containing vitamin D include oily fish (salmon, sardines, mackerel); red meat; liver; egg yolk and vitamin D fortified foods such as some juices, dairy alternatives and breakfast cereals.

Whether you suffer from full-blown SAD or are feeling more down than usual at this time of year, there are things you can do to help boost your mood. If your symptoms of depression feel overwhelming, it is always advisable to speak to your GP.

*References: [NHS](#), [Royal College of Psychiatrists](#), [Mind](#), [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence](#), [Very Well Health](#)*

**NEXT ISSUE:**

- ▶ Boost Your Energy Levels
- ▶ Dry January
- ▶ Sitting Right

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**Our thinking is innovative.** We constantly develop new responses and tools designed to address the health and wellbeing challenges that face your business and people.

**Our commitment is total.** We invest in our services, creating new ones and keeping in step with every client. We constantly explore new ways of working and make no compromises in the quality of our services.

**Simply put, we are here to help people be their best.**

