

Good Questions

Issue Twelve: Christmas special edition

December 2007

Merry Christmas!

Welcome to the final newsletter of the year from AHP Research. This month's issue is a departure from our usual e-bulletins, taking instead a light-hearted look at Christmas! The festive season has truly arrived, and maybe our assessment of Christmas will help you decide the merits of the holiday season. We take a look at the health benefits (and risks) associated with celebrating Christmas and, as Christmas is sure to bring lots of merriment (if only from the traditional Christmas cracker jokes), we also consider research on the many functions of laughter in 'In the Journals'. To end our special edition, be sure to review our alternative top ten tips for surviving Christmas to ensure you make the most of the festive season this year. Whatever you are doing, we wish you a happy holiday season and all the best for 2008.

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Christmas: good for your health?

As the Christmas season fast approaches, many of us will be striving to balance a desire to maintain good health while enjoying all the festivities of a very indulgent season. With this in mind, it seems appropriate for us to reflect upon Christmas with the same critical eye with which we view other potential health risks.

PROS

ALCOHOL

- ✓ A recent Whitehall Study¹ in the UK found that alcohol consumption has been linked to improved cognitive function with women in particular benefiting.
- ✓ In moderation, alcohol is an effective coping strategy for dealing with friends or relatives that have been strictly avoided during the rest of the year.

FOOD

- ✓ Increased chocolate consumption has been linked to prevention of cancer and heart disease, boosts in cognition, muscle recovery and mood enhancement. Cocoa powder, being the highest natural source of magnesium, was actually used by the British army for almost 100 years as an "iron ration".
- ✓ Nuts are low in saturated fat, high in fibre and a source of potassium. Brazil nuts contain high levels of selenium, which has been shown to protect women against breast cancer.
- ✓ Food is a proven protector against the effects of alcohol consumption. Lining the stomach with a glass of milk and some bread before the office Christmas party helps to prevent drunkenness and may mean that you don't have to worry about any embarrassing acts the next day.

CONS

ALCOHOL

- ✗ In December, Britons will drink 41% more than the annual monthly average, which can lead to an increase in fatal alcohol poisonings.
- ✗ An increase in binge drinking in this season is associated with a related increase in sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.
- ✗ The most preventable illness over the festive period is the common hangover.

FOOD

- ✗ On average people gain approximately four and a half pounds in weight during the four weeks of the festive period due to overindulgence. The traditional Christmas dinner contains up to 1,300 calories (excluding the pudding, drinks and other nibbles during the day).
- ✗ According to the Food Standards Agency, nearly a quarter of food poisoning outbreaks in the month of December are related to undercooked turkeys.



'Freeze'

Christmas: good for your health?

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PROS

SOCIALISING

- ✓ More time spent with family at Christmas can increase your social, emotional and mental wellbeing – but only if they are the people you actually want to spend time with!
- ✓ A comprehensive review of 32 studies found that family routines and rituals, such as Christmas, are essential to the health and well-being of families².
- ✓ Talking to family and friends prevents dementia and as Christmas seems to bring with it an abundance of both, what better way to keep your brain healthy!

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

- ✓ Receiving Christmas cards is related to increases in self-esteem, happiness and a sense of belonging, which can have positive effects on mental health.
- ✓ Popular board and party games (which for many are essential to the Christmas experience) can prevent Alzheimer's by exercising the brain and keeping it in good working order.
- ✓ Chemicals found in mistletoe may boost the immune system and slow or stop the growth of cancer.

CONCLUSIONS:

In conclusion, to those who tell you how unhealthy excess alcohol and food consumption is at Christmas, to those who bemoan family obligations and Christmas traditions, we say "Bah, humbug!" It would seem there are as many evidence-based benefits for Christmas as detriments to your mental and physical well-being. So enjoy your food, raise a glass to your family and friends, and put up that mistletoe (resisting the urge to nibble at it)...may it be a very happy Christmas for you and your loved ones!

"Enjoy your food, raise a glass to your family and friends, and put up that mistletoe... may it be a very happy Christmas for you and your loved ones!"

CONS

SOCIALISING

- ✗ Rates of domestic violence increase by 80% over the Christmas period
- ✗ Isolation can be even more acute during the family-focused Christmas period. Studies show an increase in calls to crisis and distress centres at this time³.
- ✗ Christmas office parties can result in staff disciplinaries and embarrassing rates of irresponsible behaviours in public (e.g. vomiting, kissing the boss, photocopying unmentionables and falling over).

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

- ✗ If ingested, mistletoe has serious adverse effects, e.g. seizures, slowing of the heart rate, abnormal blood pressure, vomiting, stomach and intestinal irritation, excess thirst and urination, loss of co-ordination, diarrhoea, and death.
- ✗ Classic Christmas traditions (putting up trees and gift wrapping) results in high injury rates; approx. 80,000 casualties during the 12 days of Christmas in Britain alone⁴.
- ✗ The Christmas blues can be the result of marathon shopping excursions, which can raise stress levels to those comparable of fighter pilots. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and anxiety disorders can be exacerbated, with Christmas the worst time of year for sufferers.

References

1. Britton A, Manoux A S, Marmot M. (2004). Alcohol consumption and cognitive function in the Whitehall II Study. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 160:240-247
2. Fiese et al., (2002). A Review of 50 Years of Research on Naturally Occurring Family Routines and Rituals: Cause for Celebration? *Journal of Family Psychology*, 16: 381-390
3. Medical News Today (2005). [Christmas Holiday Depression](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/35124.php). Downloaded from <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/35124.php>
4. RoSPA Press Office (2003) Don't fall for Christmas in Casualty. Downloaded from http://www.rospa.com/news/releases/2003/pr272_18_12_03.htm

5 things you never knew about...

your Christmas dinner

1. Turkeys can drown if they look up when it is raining
2. The traditional flaming Christmas pudding dates back to 1670 in England
3. According to British Christmas tradition, a wish made while mixing the Christmas pudding will come true only if the ingredients are stirred in a clockwise direction
4. A traditional Christmas dinner in early England was a head of pig prepared with mustard
5. It is estimated that 400,000 people become sick each year from eating Christmas leftovers

your Christmas tippie

1. The word "toast", meaning a wish of good health, started in ancient Rome, where a piece of toasted bread was dropped into wine
2. Most vegetable, and virtually all fruit juices, contain at least a small amount of alcohol
3. Seven percent of the entire Irish barley crop goes to the production of Guinness
4. Only 20% of the alcohol you swallow is absorbed by the stomach; you lose more water in your urine than you take in the drink itself
5. The term "brand name" originated among American distillers, who branded their names and emblems on their kegs before shipment





In the Journal

The functions of laughter

- 1 Laughter is a communication media common to all human societies. It has a mood elevating and relaxing effect.
- 2 An individuals' laughing style is as stable a characteristic as his or her fingerprints.
- 3 During REM sleep, the brain is activated through the reticular system and favors a low degree of laughter and smiling, enhancing dream states.
- 4 The mood elevating effect of laughter is assumed to be based on a biochemical mechanism. During laughter we feel released from present cares and worries and a mood of joy prevails.
- 5 Laughter therapy has been shown to relax and increase well-being and is commonly used as a psychotherapeutic tool. Since the Roman Empire, the traditional date of April 1st for merriment may be interpreted as a mass therapy, offered by human culture against stress and fear.
- 6 But what about when we know it is wrong to laugh? For example at inappropriate jokes? Although this may be perceived as social faux pas and have detrimental long-term effects on well-being, the short-term benefits are no less than described above – and perhaps even more.

So, I ask you - why is Santa's little helper feeling depressed this Christmas? Because he has low elf-esteem!

Askenasy JJM (1987). The Functions and Dysfunctions of Laughter. *Journal of General Psychology* 114(4): 317-334

Good Answers?

Every month in "Good Questions", we give you the opportunity to benefit from your own "Good Answers". Just give some thought to our Christmas quiz and send in your responses.

1. Who invented the Christmas cracker?
2. In which film was the song "White Christmas" first introduced?
3. In the song, "12 days of Christmas", how many ladies are dancing?
4. Electric Christmas tree lights were first used in which year?
5. From which country do poinsettias originate?
6. In the song, "12 days of Christmas", how many gifts are given in total?
7. Where is Christmas Island?
8. Which well-known actor died on Christmas Day in 1977?
9. What was the name of Scrooge's dead business partner in "A Christmas Carol"?
10. The Christmas tree on display in Trafalgar Square, London, is an annual gift to the UK from which country?

Answers to: info@ahpresearch.com. The closing date for entries is 12 noon on **Friday 21st December**. The entrant with the most correct answers will win an Amazon voucher. We will publish the answers in next month's issue. Good luck!

Christmas comes early! Or not....

In the run up to Christmas it is normally overspending that weighs heavily on the mind, so an estimated NHS underspend of £1.8 billion is great news, right? Apparently not. The Department of Health has recently implemented significant cutbacks resulting in job losses and drastic bed cuts, and denied vital staff pay rises. This "timely" announcement has therefore caused much furore. Recently, an independent body proposed that nurses, midwives and healthcare staff be awarded a 2.5% pay rise. Despite the surplus budget, the government has indicated that no pay rise should be more than 2%. There are also worries that a "bust and boom" health economy will be created as it has been less than two years since the NHS was in the red. Overall, it is very clear that Christmas has not yet arrived for those working in the NHS.

"Why is Santa's little helper feeling depressed this Christmas? Because he has low elf-esteem!"

In the news...

Hospital hotline to Lapland's Santa

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/north_east/3234456.stm

Dentists expect Christmas rush

http://news.netdoctor.co.uk/news_detail.php?id=18380266

Behold the Christmas miracle of antioxidants

<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/335/7630/1124?>

'I'm a risk to myself at Christmas'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/6196491.stm>



Top 10 Tips for enjoying (or at least surviving!) Christmas

Many "Top Ten Tips" for a stress-free Christmas read like a hospital diet or a regimen more suited to a yoga retreat in Thailand. So, we have decided to offer a set of more relevant and pragmatic tips for enjoying this Christmas season.

1. Food

Enjoy it! You only live once and its only once a year you can gorge yourself silly for 12 consecutive days and then brag about how bloated you feel.

2. Alcohol

Drink it! In moderation, alcohol seems to be a panacea for easing all pain and irritation during the Christmas season. If alcoholism is an issue, please ignore and see Tip #1, substituting food as an alternate indulgence.

3. Shopping

Christmas shopping should be approached with the same reverence and planning as a trek to Everest. You'll need the right clothing (comfortable shoes and layered clothing), energy drinks, sustainable snacks and, most importantly, a healthy and realistic expectation of the hostile environment that you are entering. Keep your guard up at all times, the last Nintendo Wii is not going to just jump into your arms!

4. Christmas Treats

Marks & Spencer's food advertisements have not been described as "food porn" for nothing. Packaged in baking trays which can easily be disposed of, M&S's ready made Christmas mains, puddings and nibbles are legendary - as will you be, when you pass them off as your own!

5. Christmas Parties

The biggest worry about Christmas parties used to be what to wear. Now, the possible risks include legal implications of inappropriate sexually overt acts. If you feel unable to prevent any of these embarrassing moments, its obvious that the most crucial item to wear is a "thick skin" to deal with the subsequent stories and photographic evidence.

6. Meat

The issue of the big meat dish at Christmas now includes dealing with "turkey rage", which has been known to result in assault and battery (no pun intended) - assuming, of course, that there are turkeys to fight over following recent outbreaks of bird flu. The answer to this culinary calamity is simple - see Tip #4.

7. Political Correctness

Merry Christmas! Or, to avoid excluding or offending anyone, "Happy Holidays"? The social stress of trying to create a perfect Christmas season is very complicated these days. We suggest that you wish others a Merry Christmas anyway! If they take offence, just remind them that it's the season of goodwill to all men! ...and women, and children, and animals... (have we forgotten anyone?).

8. Getting Away

The stress of travelling at Christmas is one of the eternal Christmas dilemmas - if you don't, you can't be with friends and family. But why does everyone else have to do the same? There really isn't much on offer to alleviate the pain of this situation - but maybe the promise of good food, strong drink and lots of presents at the end of the trip is enough.

9. Family

While Christmas emphasizes togetherness, it can also create tensions. Family members that you don't see from one year to the next are thrown together for days at a time. The stresses of ensuring everyone has a good Christmas can soon turn into WW3. While we strongly suggest good communication skills, consideration and tolerance for others, you may need to bring in reinforcements - see Tip # 2.

10. Children

Small children are a wonder at Christmas, with innocent eyes alight with the expectation of a visit from Father Christmas. For the children, this is the most magical night of the year - for their parents, its one of the most sleep-deprived. If you are not a parent during the Christmas season, then we highly recommended that you be thankful for the simple things in life, like sleep!



Forthcoming events:

13 Dec 2007
UKSBM 3rd Annual
Scientific Meeting:
Warwick

20 February 2008
Critical Appraisal Skills
Training (UKCRN):
London

21 February 2008
Social Context in Clinical
Research Training
(UKCRN):
London

For further details on any
of these events, please
visit our [events](#) webpage.