Keeping It R.E.A.L. for the Holidays

Common Sense Health from Maureen “Mo” McDonnell, RN
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Introduction

After the winter holiday-whirlwind passes, typically comprised of frenzied shopping, feasting and excessive partying, did you ever find yourself wishing you could have navigated through the jolliest of seasons a little differently?

Because the holidays are laced with family traditions, childhood memories, a ton of unrealistic expectations and a hefty load of commercial influences, it’s hard to break from our ingrained and practiced patterns…even if they don’t serve us anymore. Like many others, I have repeatedly experienced the post-holiday doldrums that stem from a mix of financial depletion, emotional depression, and my newly expanded waistline.

So this year I started to think about what I could do differently to make it through this stressful (I mean special) season while still having fun… yet not spending the entire month of January recuperating emotionally, physically and financially. By making a few simple adjustments to my diet, lifestyle and mental expectations, my new plan involves enjoying myself while staying focused on what really matters most…family, friends and good health! I haven’t tried this particular package of ideas before, so I’ll keep you posted as to how I feel come January. And do let me know if any of these “Keeping it REAL Tips” makes a difference for you.
R is for Reducing Sugar

Unfortunately, the white stuff (and I don’t mean snow) is all around us during this time of year. And next to heroin and cocaine, there is not a more addictive substance on the planet!

Not only does an elevated blood sugar level (from eating the holiday treats) trigger Insulin (a fat storage hormone), it also causes the release of Dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that creates a feeling of pleasure or a sense of reward. So, it’s not a wonder why we love the white stuff!
The problem is; when Insulin does its job and lowers our blood sugar level (with much of it being stored as fat) we get hungry again... and what do we typically reach for? Yes, that pleasure stimulating, addictive substance. In the midst of this health depleting, metabolic-roller coaster ride that sugar takes our body on, also consider the fact that 1 tsp of sugar (3gms) is enough to decrease our immune system’s ability to effectively fight infection.

Oh, and if I haven’t dampened the holiday spirit enough, let me just note that in addition to it causing dental decay, setting us up for insulin resistance and inflammation which can lead to Type 2 Diabetes, Obesity and Heart Disease, sugar also feeds yeast. Yes, yeast is a normal organism in our gut and on our skin. But let that stuff overgrow by having it feast on sugar, and those yeasty boys will have their own holiday party!
R.E.A.L. Tip

Keep your blood sugar stable (especially before leaving for a holiday party), by having organic sources of protein on hand.

A couple of ounces of nuts, seeds, rolled up turkey, eggs, chicken, fish or grass fed beef is enough to raise your blood sugar gradually, and keep it there for a few hours.

I also make a batch of almond flour, flax seed, sunflower seed, coconut, chocolate chip cookies (with the smallest amount of natural sweetener possible) and keep them in the freezer. When I’m craving something sweet, I grab one or two of these high fiber, high protein, low sugar treats. (see recipe at end)
E is for Exercise

Keeping up or even starting an exercise routine during the holidays can be challenging because there is so much shopping, wrapping and cooking to do! But the benefits far outweigh the hassles.

Exercise **benefits** our body as it helps to:

- burn more calories at rest
- build up our cardiovascular endurance
- improve flexibility
- increase lean body mass
- speed up our recovery from illness.

AND it also helps clear our minds of stress inducing “mind chatter.” **Focusing** is easier with exercise, and, because it causes a release of endorphins, it enhances our ability to **handle stress**.
R.E.A.L. Tip

If you just can’t find the time to hit the gym take that walk or show up for your favorite yoga class.

Then while you are out holiday shopping, select the parking space that is furthest from the store.

Also during those horrendous TV commercials extolling the merits of pharmaceuticals, hit the floor and do some ab exercises or try running in place.
A is for Alcohol

Don’t worry I’m not going to recommend that you totally avoid alcohol during the holidays. How could I? I am 100% Irish!

What I will suggest is that you monitor the type and amount of holiday cheer you consume. Of course all alcohol raises your blood sugar levels and brings with it its share of calories -

one 6oz glass of wine is about 120 calories which is about the same as 2 oz of vodka.

If you choose to have a cocktail, skip the additional sugar that comes in the form of simple syrup or sweet liqueurs. Instead ask for fresh lime or lemon.
R.E.A.L. Tip

When you arrive at your holiday party, start the night off with a nonalcoholic, non sugar, thirst-quenching beverage (such as sparkling water with a twist).

Also avoid drinking alcohol on an empty stomach and limit the amount you drink to two glasses of wine or two drinks.

Try making your wine or cocktail last longer by adding Perrier or seltzer. Alcohol is incredibly dehydrating, so in addition to limiting yourself to no more than two drinks or two glasses of wine per celebration, for every alcohol-based drink you have, be sure to consume a full glass of water.
L is for Lessening Stress

Take a step back and look at the unrealistic expectations you’ve placed on yourself in the past and make different choices.

One year, in an attempt to recreate a Norman Rockwell-type family Christmas, I invited all six of our grown kids, their significant others and the grandkids to our home for 10 days. I spent weeks selecting the perfect gifts, wrapping them just right and making festive food.

In addition to cooking elaborate meals and setting the house up to resemble the Biltmore Estate at Christmas, I also hosted a holiday open house for dozens of neighbors and friends. How did this joyous occasion turn out?

I fell apart (emotionally and physically) and wound up in bed for a week with the flu. Some people have to be hit over the head before they learn, and I guess I’m one of them.

The good news is, however, as a result of that memorable holiday, I learned that I do not have to morph into Martha Stewart and give everyone the perfect holiday experience at the expense of my own health!
Reflect on your family holiday traditions and only maintain the ones that feel the **best to you**.

Consider giving yourself a real gift by scheduling a **massage** or taking a **long leisurely bath** with Magnesium-rich Epsom salt and relaxing lavender oil.

**Breathing deeply** for 5 or 10 breaths does wonders for your blood pressure, heart health and mental state.

If you start to feel overwhelmed, step back and turn the dial on your thoughts to a more **positive channel**. Remember that no one is really helped by someone who gives from an empty cup.

Fill yours first so that anything you do, share or give comes from a **place of fullness**.
Wrap-Up

Keeping it **REAL** for the holidays doesn’t mean you can’t have fun... it’s just a new way, and possibly a healthier way, of navigating the potential pitfalls of this particular season that tends to leave even the hardiest of us fat, broke and depressed.

Instead of falling into the traps set by our own and society’s unrealistic expectations, take stock of what aspects of the holidays are most important to you. By being honest with yourself regarding how much you want to do (and spend), watching your sugar and alcohol intake, giving yourself the gift of exercise and self-care you just might have the most enjoyable holiday (and January) ever!
The REAL-LY Healthy Christmas Cookie Recipe

Preheat oven to 350 degrees

In first bowl mix:
- 1/2 cup almond flour
- 1/2 cup freshly ground flax seed
- 1/2 tsp baking soda

In second bowl:
- Warm 1/2 cup of virgin coconut oil or organic butter and whisk in 1/4 cup organic sugar (this is 1/2 of what the original recipe called for, and you can even put less in if you wish)
- Beat in 1 egg
- Add 1 tsp vanilla
Beat together until fluffy.

Stir the dry ingredients from first bowl into the wet ingredients and mix until blended
- Stir in 4 oz organic dark chocolate chips
- Add 1/2 cup unsalted sunflower seeds
- Add 1/2 cup unsweetened organic coconut

Drop 1 tsp full of mix on sheet, 2" apart.

Bake at 350 for 10-12 minutes

After they cool (and you eat a few), store in freezer because they hold together better and last longer.
Maureen “Mo” McDonnell, RN is a holistic, nutritionally-oriented RN with 37 years of experience. She lectures widely on the role nutrition and environment play in women’s and children’s health issues.

Mo is the health editor of WNC Woman Magazine and Medical Coordinator of the Imus Ranch for Kids with Cancer.

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Next Step

If you would like more tips and health information, please stay tuned to our website at www.sokhop.com. As well, please check out our FaceBook page at https://www.facebook.com/sokhop.

If you would like to take your health to the next level, consider starting with a cleanse. We will schedule a 30-day cleanse to start in mid-January. It will be online, so you won’t have to travel anywhere, and the sessions will be recorded for future viewing. If you are interested in more information or in signup up, please contact Mo at MauraHealth@aol.com.