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Ho, ho, hold the stress! The holiday season is supposed to be full of laughter but, many find it full of stress. It has been estimated that about $\frac{3}{4}$ of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress related problems. The result of chronic stress to our bodies is disastrous. This holiday season reduce the impact of stress by eating right and practicing some easy stress management tools.

Despite the myths, according to the October 1999 *Psychology Report*, there is no increase in the number of psychiatric admissions in the holiday month of December. Of course, many of us would disagree - particularly as a snow storm rolls in and cuts off the electricity and the dog gets a hold of the turkey.

Oh, the memories of holidays past. How they can make us laugh. But, with the hustle and bustle of trying to see so many family and friends we find our stress levels rising and our eating habits turning into gobble, gobble, gobble.

Stress is a complex chain of events, involving psychological, environmental and physiological factors. Stress damages the body. Prolonged stress has been linked to hypertension, fatigue, heart disease, gastrointestinal disturbances (e.g. ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome), cognitive dysfunctions (e.g. reduced memory or learning), insomnia and skin rashes. (Neuroscience Biology Review, Summer 1992) – **note they only publish in seasons so summer is the reference I used**

Stress can be detrimental to mental health. Ever noticed mental glitches in the holiday season, such as your aunt always calling you the wrong name or the hostess wearing her shirt on backwards? Simple things can help us retain our mental health.

- 1) Practice 10 minutes of deep breathing each day.
- 2) Plan some time alone. Tip - find a good book. It will lull you to take a break. Preliminary research in the May 2004 *Psychoneuroendocrinology* found positive effects with the use of mindfulness therapy on stress factors in the body.
- 3) Tell the family to take a hike. Exercise has been shown to improve mental wellness by decreasing stress and depression. (*Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, September 1993)
- 4) Have a sense of humor – particularly when Uncle Ralph falls asleep with his face in the squash. Despite the lack of scientific evidence that humor is helpful, many doctors use humor as a form of therapy. (*Journal of Psychosociology*, March 2004)
- 5) Eat right! What you eat can help your brain function better.

Some of the damaging effects of stress may be due to a deficiency in essential fatty acids (EFAs). During stress, enzymes involved in the formation of polyunsaturated fatty acids are inhibited. This is problematic as EFAs give rise to less damaging inflammation mediators than other forms of fat. Therefore, EFAs are beneficial as the underlying damage that results in the health problems associated with stress (e.g. diabetes, osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease). EFAs have also been shown to help with mental dysfunctions. If they've been shown to reduce hostility and stress in students during exams (*Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, April 1999) imagine what they can do to your family at Christmas.

Ever said, "this is going to give me an ulcer"? Or, "this is going to give me a heart attack"? It just may. Stress can cause serious damage to the body. Luckily, studies have shown that GLA can protect against ulcer formation by inhibiting the damaging effects of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), steroids, cortisol and bacteria. (*Gut*, July 1987; *Food Chemistry Toxicology*, August 1997) And, a multi-center clinical trial reported that supplementation with fish oil lowered mortality rates from cardiac causes. (*Lancet*, October 1999)

This holiday try to spruce up your plate. Don't let it look like the snow outside. Have a rainbow of colour. Fruits and vegetables are great stress busters. Antioxidants in fruits and vegetables can help your immune system stay strong through the 'cold' season. In the June 2004 *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* measurable signs of oxidative stress were reduced with the consumption of fruits and vegetables. Cherries are one fruit that is particularly good for holiday stress as it contains melatonin. Melatonin can help improve sleep quality according to the December 1995 *Lancet* study. Also, in the January 1998 *Psychiatry Research*, melatonin was found to reduce winter depression. Even though cherries are not available in Canada in December, cherry juice is, and it's a festive looking treat.

This holiday season eat right for mental health. Practice mental health skills such as relaxation and exercise. And, remember to laugh at Uncle Vernon's camp stories you've heard over a hundred times, and to be patient with little Timmy the terror. You only get to see them once a year. Wishing a happy and healthy holidays to all.

Omega -3s	Prevent damaging inflammation, and heart attacks
GLA (Omega-6)	Prevents ulcer formation
Melatonin	Improves sleep quality and helps with depression
Antioxidants	Help immune system and prevents free radical damage