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Holiday Stress and the Common Cold

'Tis the season to be Jolly Why then, do we often feel stressed, pressed for time, overwhelmed and inevitably acquire the holiday illness that knocks us off our feet? Read on to learn how stress affects our body leading to an increased risk of catching a cold/flu and how to prevent it from "catching" you this holiday.

Definition of Stress

Although the effects of stress on the body are well known, thanks to the help of multiple scientists over time, the actual definition of stress is a grey area. Hans Selye summarized it quite well when he stated: "stress is not necessarily something bad – it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental." With this in mind, Selye believed that the effects of stress on the body occur whether the stress is positive or negative. A more widely accepted definition is a condition experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources available. Simply put, stress is a part of our daily life and by acknowledging its effects we are empowered to incorporate things into our lives that decrease the long term effect on our body.

How does the body react to stress

In the body, a stressor occurs (more to do than you have time for, near accident on Route 50, relatives visiting, work/family demands, poor eating habits, lack of proper sleep, emotional strain, etc.) and the body must react. It begins in the HPA (Hypothalamus-Pituitary axis) in our brain and leads to the production of epinephrine, norepinephrine and cortisol. These hormones produced during a stressful event are designed to send us into a "fight or flight" response by increasing heart rate, increasing blood pressure, redirecting blood to the muscles, heart and brain and away from the gastrointestinal tract (stomach and intestines), releasing glucose, the bodies fuel, and decreasing the immune system. This is beneficial short term, when we are in eminent danger. Long term stress, however, has been associated with serious chronic health issues including but not limited to, autoimmune disease, ulcerative colitis, headaches, cold/flu, diabetes, depression and memory/cognitive loss.

How does this increase your risk of catching a cold/flu? The mechanism which shunts blood from the organs to the muscles, leads to poor digestion and decreased nutrient availability to the bodies cells during a time of increased demand. The symptoms you may experience are gas and bloating, indigestion or nausea. The decrease in circulation of blood to the forebrain (center for executive reasoning and logic) and the prefrontal

cortex (conscious activity and intelligence or the ability to think) leads to poor decision making, a decreased ability to comprehend and address situations and increased stress. By far the most important, is the effect on the immune system. With decreased lymphocytes and NK (natural killer) cells we are unable to prevent or heal from a cold as fast. The effects of cortisol are so powerful at decreasing the immune system that a pharmaceutical version is used with organ transplant patients in order to suppress the immune systems attack against the foreign organ.

How to Decrease the effects of stress this Holiday Season

In naturopathic medicine it is important to address the body mind and spirit to find homeostasis or balance in our world. In respect to the body, a good vitamin B-complex (B1, B5 and B6 in particular) and vitamin C have been shown to decrease the effects of chronic stress. Massage will take the body out the sympathetic nervous system (stress induced) into the parasympathetic nervous system (relaxation mode) leading to increased blood flow to the digestive tract and decreased heart rate. Exercise will releases tension in the body, increase immune system function (both lymphocytes and NK cells), and keep off the pounds from the abundance of holiday food. The mind can be addressed with meditation. Meditation can be sitting in the lotus position for 30 minutes, taking a hot Epsom salt bath, walking in the woods, or simply taking time off to play with your children. As for spirit, this is what the holidays are all about. Whatever you spiritual practice may be, take time to reflect on the beauty of all things and re-connect with your higher being. Take time out to simply “be” this holiday season, or in “The Power of Now” as Eckhardt Tolle would say. Listen, and maybe this year at the end of the holiday season, in place of a pile of gifts, you will have a sense of peace in your heart as you reflect on all the memories of those you spent time in the presence of. We easily become caught up in the “to do” list of the holiday season and forget that it is about spending time with our loved ones, the gift of time and presence is by far the best gift.

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