

WOMEN'S  
HEALTH

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# How to have your (Christmas) cake and eat it...

**T**is the season to be jolly, but do you fear entering the new year feeling glutenous regret and drained?

For those of you going through menopause, you may already be experiencing symptoms such as anxiety, bloating, constipation, weight gain, poor sleep, reflux, flushes, and sweats. This can be worsened by some of the lifestyle and diet choices made during the festive period.

But don't let your well-earned festive break be tainted with an impending sense of doom laced with worry and regret. It doesn't have to be this way. With the right guidance you can enjoy your festivities while avoiding the

January blues. Here are my festive tips to make Christmas and menopause symptoms more manageable and leave you emerging the other side feeling energised.

## TAKE THE LID OFF THE PRESSURE COOKER

There is an expectation for Christmas to be perfect, which can feel overwhelming, especially for those going through a stressful period in their life. Throw in depleted hormones and this becomes particularly challenging. In fact, hormones play a huge role in our mood. For a start, there are oestrogen receptors in the part of the brain that controls emotion. When oestrogen levels fall around menopause, this can result in low mood and anxiety.

Stress itself can disrupt the balance of hormones,

leading to long term negative effects on mood, sleep, energy, weight and motivation, to name a few. So, what can you do?

Take time out to relax. Constantly rushing around increases our stress hormones sending the synergy out of balance. Set aside time for you.

Why not treat yourself to a massage or yoga sessions. You don't need to spend lots of money, go for a walk or practice meditation at home using APPs such as "CALM" or "HEADSPACE".

Talk to your loved ones. Christmas may be a time for family to gather but it can put strain on relationships. If you're battling with menopause symptoms, it can feel isolating, and you may not feel able to share your struggles. But the reality is, talking to loved ones can help them understand and in turn support you... and don't forget to delegate some tasks while you've got their ear.

## BE KIND TO YOUR GUT

I find one of the many joys of festivities is the limitless snacks. But constantly picking at foods high in dairy, sugar, and saturated fats, surprisingly, keeps us feeling hungry.

These food groups are also renowned for



causing gut inflammation and burdening the liver, leading to water retention, bloating, reflux, constipation, lethargy, poor sleep, and mood issues, not forgetting weight gain.

But let's not take the joy out of Christmas. There is a happy medium!

Eat what you want but remember to enjoy it. Perhaps include some healthy alternatives with foods high in protein and fibre, such as raw nuts and fruit. You could switch up crisps for wholewheat pitta breads and crudites. Buy dips, like hummus, made from beans and chickpeas. Better still, could you make them yourself? You may also wish to buy miniature versions of your favourite treats.

Eat three regular meals. This will keep you full so when you reach for snacks it's for enjoyment rather than hunger. Try and look at your week on average rather than day-by-day. That way, if one day is more indulgent, you can try cutting back the next day, without entering extremes.

Chew chew chew. It may sound obvious but chewing each bite slowly not only burns calories but helps create lots of saliva in the mouth, releasing digestive enzymes to break down food. If we eat large meals or gulp food quickly, the digestive system struggles to break food down, leading to bloating, indigestion, and reflux. If you are already prone to these, you may find benefit from chewing foods that increase digestive enzymes, such as ginger and lemon. These can also be drunk by adding to warm water.

Try probiotics. Probiotics are strains of live microbes that live in the gut. Certain strains are especially good for our gut as they produce enzymes to break down hard to digest starches and sugars. They are found in fermented foods such as kimchi, sauerkraut, live yoghurt and kefir. You can buy probiotic supplements but you need the right amount and type of microbes to feel the benefits, so do your research before investing. Prebiotics also play their part, helping the good bacteria to grow and stay alive. These are found in foods high in polyphenol such as broccoli, flax, berries, onions and, of course, brussels sprouts.

### KEEP ON MOVING

Even when taking a break from usual exercise, it's important to keep active. Movement encourages digestion, boosts metabolism and helps stop those sugary cravings which have us reaching for the entire box of Quality Street (other

chocolate brands are available).

Being active increases energy, which has a positive effect on sleep, flushes and mental wellbeing.

Committing to exercise during the festive period can be tough. Allow yourself short or lazy paced sessions or walks. In fact, you are more likely to do some exercise regularly if you take the pressure off. Remember, every step counts.

### DRINK IF YOU WANT TO — NOT BECAUSE OF PEER PRESSURE

Drinking alcohol is often customary around festivities. Ask yourself are you drinking just to be sociable, out of habit, or even using it as a crutch to deal with stress?

Alcohol is often overlooked as being an unhealthy treat as it's not food. In fact, it can be loaded with sugar and calories. The same can be true of mixers. Alcohol is a "depressant", increasing anxiety and low mood. It is a diuretic causing an overactive bladder and, for many women, it can escalate perimenopause symptoms such as sleep disruption, night sweats and hot flushes.

There are many non-alcohol alternatives but check these, as they are often also full of sugar.

Try alternating between alcohol and water. On top of spacing out your drinks, keeping well hydrated also helps improve metabolism, digestion, memory and concentration, energy and dry skin, all symptoms heightened around menopause.

### GET SOME SLEEP

With late night festivities and early morning preparations, festive seasons can mean burning the candles at both ends. Lack of sleep can have a knock-on effect on most aspects of life including elevating stress, poor motivation and sugar cravings. Furthermore, low oestrogen levels around menopause disrupts the balance of our stress and sleep hormones, which is why poor sleep is one of the most common symptoms around menopause.

Be realistic with yourself. If you know there are going to be a few late nights



for the special occasions like Christmas Day and New Years Eve, then stick to a routine and plan early nights for the other days, if possible.

### SEEK SUPPORT

It can be tricky if you're trying to navigate this busy period, all while battling debilitating symptoms. But remember, help is available.

For mental well-being support, the charity Mind, has a list of contacts dedicated to supporting people's mental health over the Christmas period ([www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk))

The Samaritans has a free dedicated phoneline 24 hours a day (116 123)

For help managing menopause symptoms, seek support from a women's health specialist. Menopause is not a one size fits all and treatments should be tailored to your individual needs.

### MY FINAL TIP...

Be kind to yourself!

Don't just do chores, spend time doing activities you enjoy — make a playlist of your favourite Christmas songs, make decorations, or bake some holiday gifts. How about giving back to your community. Volunteering or giving to your local food bank, can feel really rewarding.

We can get so caught up with the hustle and bustle of the festive period, we forget to appreciate what's in front of us. Making a list of things you are grateful for can boost happiness and don't forget to recognise your own achievements!

*Merry Christmas everyone.*

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