

HEALTH AND STRESS

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The American Institute of Stress*

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HOLIDAY STRESS — SOME SOURCES, SYMPTOMS, SIGNS AND SOLUTIONS

KEYWORDS: "Black Friday", internet shopping, SAD syndrome, Tromso, *morketiden*, "Holiday Heart", allergic reactions, travel stress, abdominal obesity, weight loss, FTC, Cortislim, Cortistress

Christmas is traditionally a joyous occasion when vacation from work or school provides an opportunity to get together with family and friends and exchange gifts that have been thoughtfully selected for each individual. For Christians, it is also a very holy day for religious observance and prayers for peace on earth.

Strictly speaking, the Yuletide, Noel or Christmas season runs from December 24 to January 6, but this has changed as Christmas has progressively turned into more of a celebration of Santa Claus than the Nativity. The holiday season now starts on "Black Friday", the day after Thanksgiving. This used to be the busiest shopping day of the year but now this applies more to traffic than to actual sales.

It was called "Black Friday" because it was the day many merchants saw their balance sheets move out of the red into the black. Since it is a day off when not much is going on in the sports world, heavily advertised bargains lure millions of Americans to the malls to inaugurate the Christmas shopping season. "Door busters" wait outside for hours for phenomenal "early bird" sales at dawn and some stores try to get a head start by even staying open on Thanksgiving.

"Black Friday" has now actually dropped to fifth when it comes to sales. For the past decade, the leading shopping days have been the two weekends before

Christmas and especially the last Saturday. These are the days you should try to avoid at all costs because of the frenzied shoppers who exhibit little of the "Christmas spirit" as they compete with crowds of bargain hunters for the limited number of choice items still available. The best way to avoid this chaos as well as prevent other holiday stresses is to **PLAN AHEAD** — And the time to start doing this is **RIGHT NOW!**

ALSO INCLUDED IN THIS ISSUE

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- Σ Update On Weight Loss Supplements That Allegedly Work By Reducing Stress

Traffic Jams, Parking Problems, Long Lines And "Sorry, All Sold Out"

That's why it seemed like a good idea to devote this issue to Holiday Stress. Some might argue that August rather than November might have been preferable. More people are on vacation and things tend to slow down in the last month of summer so there is more time to devote to personal needs. In addition, by the time you read this and at least a week or two before Thanksgiving, Santa Clauses have already arrived at many Malls. It is now not unusual to also see artificial Christmas trees, decorations and cards displayed in drug stores and specialty shops right after Halloween or even before.

The internet has had a dramatic influence on shopping habits since online Christmas gift sales increase significantly every year. They jumped from \$730 million in 1998 to \$3.35 billion in 1999 and are projected to be \$11.4 billion this year. Web retailers say that the busiest Christmas shopping day is now the Saturday rather than the Friday after Thanksgiving. Last year, web surfers spent over \$500 million for gifts during Thanksgiving week, about twice as much as the week before. Surveys show that the majority of purchasers seem satisfied and intend to increase their Christmas shopping from favorite web sites as well as new ones that now specialize in this via pop-up ads. Most admitted that they missed being able to actually see and feel the merchandise and over a third said they looked forward to the festive atmosphere and decorations and shopping with friends. However, some find they can still enjoy these and browse at upscale stores for gifts and suggestions and then save money through a number of on-line services that will comparison shop for the same items and find lower prices.

Christmas shopping can also make you sick. According to a recent survey in the U.K. published by the Royal Mail, more than 14 million people suffer from a range of complaints brought on by Christmas shopping. These included headaches (6 million), stomach aches, dizziness and claustrophobia, along with a host of stress related symptoms such as irritability (over 9 million), insomnia, feeling faint, loss of temper (4.5 million) and even bursting into tears. In one experiment, two sisters wearing heart monitors shopped for six identical Christmas gifts, one in stores and the other on the internet. Store shopping took six times longer and heart rate doubled from 69 to 138 during the four-hour ordeal. Her sister maintained a steady heart rate of 65 to 67 during the 36 minutes it took her to purchase the same presents online from home.



One physician warned that time urgent shopping at stores could be particularly dangerous for many individuals with hypertension or heart disease. More people are now also buying their gifts from catalogues or various television home-shopping channels to avoid the crowds as well as other health hazards like colds and the flu. Here again, it is important to shop as early as possible, since as Christmas approaches these as well as internet sites are often out of the most popular items. Others are so swamped with orders that they cannot guarantee delivery in time, especially when sent via a severely overburdened postal service.

Planning ahead also means listing all the people you want to give gifts to and taking pains to pick something that you are certain will be useful or enjoyable to each recipient. If you can't think of anything an appropriate gift certificate will work. Keep a record of what you gave for this and other occasions to avoid duplication. In some instances, you may be able to buy attractive items in bulk for teachers, neighbors or co-workers provided they don't know each other. Shopping all year long will improve your choices and reduce costs.

Holiday "Blues", "Headaches" And Other Christmas Health Hazards

Some people do become depressed as Christmas nears but there can be various explanations for this and the "holiday blues" may be more fiction than fact. Around fifteen years ago, Jane Brody wrote in her New York Times column that "Christmas is the most depressing time of year." When pressed for proof, she explained that "psychiatrists are busiest then", and "the suicide rate rises". As a result, we are now invariably warned about the "holiday blues" and an alleged increase in attempted suicides, prisoner uprisings and disturbances in mental hospitals. However, there is little hard data to support this.

A National Center for Health Statistics study found that there are more suicides in April than any other month, and that December actually had the fewest. Another review of Ohio State mental hospitals reported no increased incidence of depression in patients admitted during the holiday season, and those already hospitalized felt most depressed in early fall, rather than around Christmas. Although the "holiday blues" has now become a widely accepted phenomenon, it may well be more of a self-perpetuating media creation. In 1974, the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature* did not list a single article related to holiday depression. However, ten years later, so many had appeared that a separate heading for this subject had to be created.

There is no denying that Christmas can be depressing for many, especially when a loved one can no longer join in the celebration due to death or illness. Such situations have increased following 9/11 and the Iraq conflict. It is also important to remember that December 21st is the shortest day of the year and that depression tends to worsen when the days become darker. Patients with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD Syndrome) become significantly depressed when there is less daylight and often improve dramatically when exposed to artificial light for an hour before sunrise and after sunset. However, it is not generally appreciated that patients with other forms of depression also experience an intensification of their symptoms when deprived of daylight.

Normal people can also be affected. Tromsø, a city in Norway that is 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle has about 49 days during the winter beginning around November 25 when the sun is never seen. This period is referred to as "*mørketiden*" (murky time) and as one psychiatrist noted, "The whole city slows down, people's concentration and work capacity reduce, and they are always tired". There is a definite increase in depression, particularly in women. Sales of sleeping pills, pep pills and tranquilizers rise sharply and accidents increase. The sun's return after 7 weeks is celebrated as "*Soldag*" ("Sun day"). The first rays of sunshine are greeted with tears, prayers, and special wishes, children are sent home early from school and everyone stops working by noon.

The holiday season can be associated with a variety of health disorders due to excess drinking and eating, disturbed sleeping habits, seasonal pressure at work and an accelerated pace of family and social obligations that leave little time for personal relaxation. Overindulgence in favorite foods not only increases heartburn or "*agita*",

but in patients susceptible to attacks of gout or kidney stones, could be a ticket to the hospital. Christmas also often coincides with the flu season, and there may be a tendency for increased colds because of greater and closer indoors contact with others and more frequent travel. As noted in a previous Newsletter, "Holiday Heart Syndrome" refers to episodes of abnormal heart rhythms that tend to occur following heavy holiday or weekend sprees of drinking. If you are admitted to the hospital with a heart attack during the holiday season you will also be more likely to die than at other times of the year. According to a two-year nationwide study of 135,000, the reason for this is that you are less likely to receive lifesaving medications like aspirin and beta-blockers or to undergo emergency angioplasty. Researchers believe that this is due to lower staffing of doctors, nurses and technicians on vacation during the holiday season.

The holidays can also give you a headache, both literally and figuratively. Several years ago, the head of the National Headache Foundation reported that "from Thanksgiving to New Year, we see a greater incidence of tension-type headaches and migraines. At my private headache clinic in Chicago, we treat about 40% more patients than we would in a normal 40 day period - we're busy." While increased stress may be a factor, altered sleep patterns because of late night parties could also be important. Chronic sleep deprivation causes some people to sleep later on days off, leading to a build-up of carbon dioxide in the blood that precipitate headaches during the night or early in the morning. In one study, simply correcting the disturbed sleep patterns cured this type of headache in two out of three patients.

Difficulty in falling asleep or staying asleep is quite common during the holiday season. A Gallup poll found that 76% of American adults reported losing sleep between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. Half of the respondents said they lost 3 or more hours of sleep per week, with concerns about debt, remembering the loss of loved ones, scheduling too many activities and family issues being common causes. Three out of four admitted spending much more money than they intended and 85% in this group complained of losing sleep. The survey of over 1000 revealed that almost half reported experiencing more stress during the holidays. Insomnia was much more than twice as prevalent in those who were "extremely/very stressed" (72%) compared to adults who were "not very/not at all" stressed (32%). More women (52%) than men (37%) reported experiencing holiday insomnia and women were over twice as likely as men to report that they felt "exhausted" or "very tired" because of all the holiday hustle and bustle (26% versus 12%).

An increase in certain types of allergic reactions can also contribute to holiday misery and stress. The most common culprit is food, especially in those who are allergic to nuts. Peanuts are sometimes used as a thickening agent in soups and gravies and may be concealed in pies or pastries. Christmas trees and decorations can also pose problems since some people can develop a rash similar to poison ivy when exposed to the sap of evergreens. The scent from the resin of the trees can be irritating to hay fever and asthma patients whose airways are often overly reactive to any irritant. Many of these patients also experience breathing difficulties because of a sensitivity to mold spores living on the trunk of the tree that get into the air. Others suffer from a non-allergic form of rhinitis that is triggered by the smell of tree boughs and needles.

Travel And Other Holiday Stresses And Tips On How To Avoid Them

Holiday travel can prove extremely stressful, especially when you have kids along, everyone is loaded with gifts and baggage, you seem to have picked the same dates as everybody else on the planet and wintry weather causes unexpected delays. Since 9/11, fear of flying, long security lines and intensive scrutiny and screening have created additional stresses. Here again, it is essential to **PLAN AHEAD**. Whatever

your mode of travel, allow yourself more time than you can possibly imagine that you need. In addition to checkout lines, finding a cab or airport parking can be expected to take longer than usual. Always check weather, traffic, and parking reports before departing, and have some backup ideas (leave earlier, leave later, use another mode of transportation) ready to prevent problems. If you must finish some work try to take it with you. Sitting in an airport lounge working or reading is a lot more relaxing than sitting in a traffic-stalled taxi 20 minutes before your flight departs. If you're traveling by air, consider the advantages of checking your luggage. The freedom of movement gained during your journey is often worth the risk, particularly if you'll have layovers in crowded airports. Think about possible delays and decide if you're up to carting those carry-ons everywhere you go. Planes and overhead compartments are going to be at their fullest capacity and those among the last to board are often forced to do this anyway. If you find that your holiday travel is unbearable, use this year's get-together to discuss alternate plans for next year. If family "tradition" dictates that you meet at a far-off or inconvenient location suggest a change to a more accessible place for next year (or offer to act as host yourself). If you decide to skip travel next year, "We're actually planning to do something different" is a lot easier to say now than a few weeks before the next Thanksgiving or Christmas gathering. If you can't avoid traveling at holiday time, make a note in your calendar to arrange reservations for your trip sometime in July or August. This will help you to find the most convenient flight times and connections.

Stress results from threats and challenges over which you feel you have little control but this is often due to faulty perceptions about their real danger or significance. For most of us, the holiday season is apt to be stressful because of trying to find the right gifts for everyone at the right price, remembering to send cards to everybody you should, wrapping presents, traffic jams, crowded stores, long lines, last minute oversights, busy schedules, unavoidable confrontations with relatives you'd rather not be with, career and travel obligations that conflict with family functions, too many parties or events you can't get out of, etc., etc. Since the best way to avoid such problems is to prevent or minimize them the following tips may be helpful.

- Σ Sit down today and decide on how much you want to budget for holiday expenses and stick to it. Then make a list of all the people you want to give gifts to, and about how much you are willing to spend on each. Don't forget to include any birthdays or anniversaries that also come in December that may require presents, as well as unavoidable entertainment, decorating, and travel expenses.
- Σ Know how much you owe on your credit cards before you start racking up bills. Avoid "buy now and pay later". One way to resist this temptation is tell yourself that if you can't afford to pay for it with cash you probably can't afford it. If you must use credit cards, carry two of them. Use one with a zero balance for purchases you will pay off in full and another with the lowest interest for purchases you will pay off over time.
- Σ If you use a debit card guard it closely along with your PIN. Studies show that most PINs are combinations of birthdays, street addresses, or phone numbers. If your wallet or purse is stolen, most crooks will try to get into your account with a PIN that is similar to other numbers on your driver's license or other identification cards.

- Σ Write down your expenses as you incur them, indicating whether you spent cash, or charged a credit card, wrote a check or used a debit card. Keep a running total so you don't exceed your budget.
- Σ Start your shopping when there are Thanksgiving sales and you have had adequate time to compare prices. Get on the mailing lists of as many stores as possible so that you will have advance notice of sales, get preferred prices, and avoid the crowds. As indicated, it's even better to shop earlier in the year, and to stockpile gifts that can be given to several people, such as books, tapes, compact discs, specialty foods and items, newspaper or magazine subscriptions, etc.
- Σ If your budget is tight, start trying to save money now by cutting back on eating out and entertainment, or possibly even bringing your lunch to work. Try to avoid the urge to treat yourself by buying unnecessary items on impulse. When feasible and appropriate, a homemade gift is often much less expensive and more appreciated.
- Σ If finances are not a problem, be innovative. Credit for a limousine, clean-up maid service, massage or spa treatment or something else unusual like an oversize bottle of wine, especially if this is something the recipient might want to give to someone else, and be sure to indicate that they have that option.
- Σ Get plenty of restful sleep by sticking to a regular bedtime routine. Avoid caffeine in beverages and chocolate after 5 PM and eat light meals in the evening. Eating a big dinner as well as drinking alcohol a few hours before going to bed can disrupt sleep patterns. Try to fit some exercise in during the day since this not only improves mood but also facilitates falling asleep and sleeping well.
- Σ Don't procrastinate by doing whatever you can as soon as you can. Undone chores hanging over your head are chronic stresses and getting them out of the way creates a feeling of relief and accomplishment.
- Σ Don't be afraid to get help. Delegate certain household chores to other family members if they are well within their capabilities. Ask some of your guests to contribute part of a holiday meal or hire people to do this or tasks that you find unpleasant or time consuming that can easily be "farmed out."

If the holidays give you a headache, the blues or the blahs, a variety of stress reduction strategies may be helpful. If all else fails, consider spending your Christmas vacation in some sunny climate.

Update On Weight Loss Supplements That Allegedly Work By Reducing Stress

As emphasized in past Newsletters, there is a clear link between abdominal obesity and cortisol, an adrenal hormone that is secreted during stress. This has opened the door for entrepreneurs and charlatans to promote various non-prescription products claiming to produce significant weight loss by reducing stress and therefore cortisol. Since such nutritional aids do not fall under the jurisdiction of the FDA they are not

required to show proof of either efficacy or safety or that the contents of the container correspond with what is listed on the label. A half dozen of these spurious supplements were identified in our May Newsletter along with their incredible claims designed to confuse consumers with pseudoscientific promotions. One of the most misleading and profitable is Cortislim, which contains vitamin C, calcium and chromium along with concoctions such as "Cortiplex Blend" (magnolia bark extract, beta-sitosterol, theanine), "Leptiplex Blend" (green tea extract, bitter orange peel extract), and "Insutrol Blend" (banana leaf extract, vanadium). The names of these various "Blends" were carefully crafted and advertised to suggest that they lower cortisol, increase leptin, a hormone secreted by fat cells shown to cause weight loss in some strains of rodents and to reduce insulin resistance, which is largely responsible for the development of Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, elevated lipids and other metabolic syndrome manifestations that greatly increase the risk of coronary disease.

Some of the Cortislim claims include "causes weight loss of 10 to 50 pounds for virtually everyone, causes users to lose as much as 4 to 10 pounds per week over multiple weeks, causes weight loss specifically from the abdomen, stomach, and thighs, eliminates cravings, controls appetite, burns calories more efficiently and naturally through thermogenesis, and diminishes hunger and stress eating." The same manufacturer also offers Cortistress which "controls cortisol", described as the "underlying cause of every modern lifestyle disease". This panacea should probably be taken by everyone to "reduce the risk of or prevent conditions such as osteoporosis, obesity, diabetes, Alzheimer's' disease, cancer, and cardiovascular disease."

The manufacturers claim a clinical study attests to Cortislim's remarkable weight loss efficacy but no peer-reviewed article is provided and their web site only describes an unpublished study by the product's founder. Quackwatch.com and PhilKaplan.com have been very critical of how this and related products have been promoted but unless they are proven to be harmful there is little that can be done to protect the public. Supplements containing ephedra were finally banned last April because of numerous reported deaths. This created a sudden weight loss supplement void that also boosted sales of Cortislim and similar scams. After all, what could be better than a safe non-prescription pill that would reduce stress, shed extra pounds and had scientific backing.

The fact is that no herbal remedies, botanical preparations, or dietary supplements of any type have been scientifically shown to produce weight loss, much less the ability to reduce cortisol levels or block its effects. The active ingredient of Cortislim's bitter orange peel extract is synephrine, a close chemical cousin of ephedra with many of the same serious side effects that are magnified by catechins in green tea extract. Both extracts are allowed under the ephedra ban so it was somewhat surprising to learn that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recently charged the makers of Cortislim and Cortistress with violating the FTC Act and that the FDA has now also filed charges. Here's how they did it.

The FTC was able to step in because of TV infomercials that had been designed to look like episodes of an independent talk show called "Breakthroughs". They featured Drs. Greg Cynaumon and Shawn Talbott in an interview format without revealing that they are principals in a joint venture to create, manufacture, and market CortiSlim and CortiStress. When a toll-free telephone number appears on-screen for "more information", viewers who call in are told that they will receive a special discount if they mention the program. They are advised to diet and exercise while taking CortiSlim and not to weigh themselves for the first month of use. CortiSlim sells for \$49.99 per

one-month supply plus a \$7.99 shipping and handling fee no matter how you buy it. The FTC suit states that the infomercials were represented as independent television programs, rather than paid commercial advertising and were deceptive. The complaint seeks permanent injunctive relief, including redress for consumers who purchased the products. The FDA also sent a warning letter telling the company that unsubstantiated claims that CortiSlim "eliminates cravings" and "controls appetite" violated federal law. In addition the FTC has sent warning letters to more than 25 web site operators and others claiming that their products will "affect cortisol and thereby cause weight loss, reduce the risk of or prevent disease, or produce other health benefits." The letter warns that the FTC is "not aware of any competent and reliable scientific evidence to support those claims" and emphasizes that such unsupported claims are unlawful under the FTC Act. Accordingly, Web site operators and other marketers must discontinue any false or deceptive claims immediately.

On September 30, The Federal Trade Commission and the defendants submitted a stipulated interim agreement that, with the court's approval, will become an order. Under the agreement, advertising for CortiSlim and CortiStress cannot make any of the claims alleged in the FTC's complaint. The defendants agree to limit their future advertising to claims that are supported by competent and reliable scientific evidence and agree not to misrepresent that their products are supported by scientific studies. In addition, the defendants agree not to use any advertisement that misrepresents itself as something other than a paid advertisement, and they also agree to include appropriate "paid advertisement" disclaimers in their advertising.

Will any of these actions change things? It all sounds good but from past experience, things are likely to get bogged down with legal challenges as to wording and other negotiations. There is just too much money at stake with hundreds of thousands of dollars coming in daily. I am willing to bet that by the time you read this, the same infomercials and claims will still be on TV and that no date has been set to stop them — Stay Tuned!

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