

Eat, drink and be merry ... in moderation

The holiday season provides an easy excuse to indulge ourselves - in large meals, festive spirits and sweets in the shape of Santa and his elfin and hooved employees.

But our reckless gastronomical abandon, combined with a self-imposed exile from the gym, could explain why the average person gains about a pound between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Those who are obese can put on at least five pounds, according to one study. Dr. Michael Miyamoto, a Mission Viejo cardiologist, says diet could partly explain why deaths from natural causes spike during the two-week period between Dec. 25 and Jan. 7. A 2004 study showed that heart attacks claim 12.4 percent more victims than normal on Christmas Day.

"It's an interesting phenomenon, and it's not completely understood at this point," Miyamoto said. "There are probably a lot of factors: the stress of the holidays, people who are eating more than they normally do, or drinking more alcohol, or delaying seeking medical attention."

Laura Wiens, fitness manager at the 24-Hour Fitness Sport in Foothill Ranch, says visits to the gym December 2008, then shot up to 49,901 in January 2009. They held steady in the 45-50K range throughout the year, then started plummeting again this October and November. The trend: People blow off workouts during the holidays, then expect to pick up where they left off after New Year's.

"If you miss just a few weeks, it's almost like you're starting over," Wiens said. "If you miss two months, it's definitely starting over. A lot of times, people drop off and they don't come back."

Miyamoto urges people not to delay medical attention for an urgent health problem simply because their regular doctor may not be available. By waiting too long, "a symptom that might be treatable becomes too advanced to treat," he says.

Here are some tips County trainer and nutritionist Deborah McCarthy. "You have to know of all the delectables that are out there, which are the ones that are more special to you," she said. "You have to prioritize those, because if you ate every single one, you'd have a 5-10-pound weight gain."

Late fall and winter can bring cravings for not only sweets, but comforting carbs, like potatoes and pasta. For starches, choose brown rice or whole-grain pasta. Instead of mashed potatoes, try a baked potato, with its nutrient-rich skin. If her clients are going to be away for the holidays, she works out an interim plan for them, so they can at least maintain their fitness level.

"Most people say, 'I don't have a facility when I'm going on vacation.' They use it as an excuse," she says. "There are a lot of things you can do without a full gym. Core work: Situps, crunches, ab stuff. You can do lunges, squats, pushups. You just have to be creative."

And if you can get out of the house and set foot in the gym, you just might have the place to yourself.

(Photo by Scott Olson, Getty Images)

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