Approaching a healthy new year: Birmingham's sport and exercise experts offer their top tips

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Experts from the University of Birmingham set out their advice for how to stay healthy during the holiday period and how best to approach exercise and nutrition for a healthy 2013.

Dr Gareth Wallis, Lecturer, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

'My first piece of advice would be to not go overboard in the first place over the festive period. You don't need to over-indulge to enjoy the great food available around the Christmas period. The second piece of advice would be to get active during the Festive period – take advantage of not having to work and get out and do some exercise. This will help burn calories and balance any extra you might have consumed in your diet. In the New Year take a sensible approach to resolutions – extreme approaches rarely last. Select a healthy balanced diet and gradually increase your physical activity levels by doing activities you enjoy. If you join a gym, don't do too much too soon as you'll end up feeling sore and reluctant to go back. And, don't worry about the crowds in the gym, they'll likely subside in a few weeks and you'll have the place to yourself.'

Dr Andy Blannin, Lecturer, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

'Obviously Christmas dinner is a large intake of calories, but it is the grazing, alcohol and left-overs throughout the day that cause as much damage. People shouldn't worry too much about one day of the year – Christmas is a time to relax and enjoy ourselves. Gradual weight gain over our adult years is mainly due to small daily energy imbalances, which are individually trivial, but when they accumulate over months and years cause us to very gradually gain weight. My view is people shouldn't worry too much about the number of calories on Christmas day, perhaps just be mindful of how quickly the calorie count can increase above the usual level. After Christmas is the time to reflect on calories consumed and energy expenditure. Most studies show calorie restriction, or dieting, is more beneficial in the short-term, while exercise is better as a long-term strategy. Regular walking is as good as any, and as a general rule of thumb, you expend approximately 100kcal per mile covered.'

Janice L. Thompson, Professor of Public Health Nutrition & Exercise, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

'One easy way to reduce your energy intake is to decrease the amount of calorie-containing beverages you drink. Our bodies don't feel satiated when we drink "liquid" calories, making it very easy to overindulge. Also, most people don't realise how many calories beverages can contain. Alcohol-containing beverages are an obvious target: a pint of bitter beer has 182 calories, a can (550ml) of Stella Artois Lager has 248 calories, and a standard glass of wine (175ml) has 134 calories! Fizzy drinks, fruit drinks (such as squash), and juices are also relatively high in calories. And although a 150ml glass of 100% fruit juice counts toward your 5-a-day, you shouldn't drink more than one glass a day as juices are not only high in calories compared to fruit, they also contain sugars and acids that promote tooth erosion. One simple change you can make is to simply drink less than you normally would - even reducing your intake by one-half pint, stopping at one regular glass of wine, or blending fruit juice with soda water or diet lemonade can cut your calories and help make it easier to embark on a healthy new year.'

Nikos Ntoumanis, Professor of Exercise & Sport Psychology, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

'Following through a New Year's resolution to engage in regular physical activity and a healthy lifestyle requires not only the motivation to change, but also the willpower (also called self-control) to overcome temptations (e.g. unhealthy foods, sedentary activities). However research indicates that self-control is a limited resource, and therefore individuals should try to consolidate a change in a single health behaviour first (i.e. regular exercise) and then move on to another behaviour (diet). Trying to change multiple behaviours simultaneously could be counterproductive as exerting self-control towards one behaviour (avoiding sedentary temptations) might undermine self-control attempts toward the other behaviour (avoiding a high calorie snack). Individuals are also less able to exert willpower later on the day than early in the day if their jobs require a high level of self-control. Also research has shown that many individuals overestimate their ability to resist temptation. People who perceive to have a high capacity to control their impulses expose themselves to more tempting situations and ultimately engage in more impulsive behaviour (perhaps as a result of depletion of willpower), than those who perceive a lower capacity to self-control. So researchers recommend that an effective way of maintaining self-control, particularly when depleted, is to avoid highly tempting situations. For example new exercisers who plan to exercise in the evening should avoid watching television first "for a little while" before they start their workout. Research has also indicated that self-control can also be boosted by inducing positive mood, promoting motivation for health behaviour which is based on internal reasons (e.g. personal importance) as opposed to external reasons (e.g. pressure from others, social approval), and taking breaks between activities that demand self-control. Further, self-control can be enhanced by making an activity more habitual. For instance it has been found that forming implementation intentions ("if-then" plans) can help to overcome temptations. Using again the example of new exercisers who plan to exercise in the evening, these individuals should form a plan so that they are prepared when at the end of their working day they are invited out by their colleagues for "a drink". Lastly, keeping blood glucose levels steady by consuming regular meals might help individuals self-control in tempting situations (e.g. being offered a high calorie cake) when they are in a "hot state" (i.e., hungry).'

Dr Cecilie Thøgersen-Ntoumani, Lecturer in Exercise Psychology, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

'Unfortunately even when people *intend* to increase exercise behaviour, this does not always lead to the behaviour being enacted. However there are a number of strategies the individual can use to help them start, and stick to, a new exercise regimen. First specifying when, where, how and for how long to exercise (e.g. at 9 a.m., straight after taking the kids to school, I will cycle to work) has shown to be more effective than simply forming a generic exercise goal (e.g. I want to exercise more to lose weight). Secondly it is critical to note down (using a log, diary or similar) how much exercise he/she does which acts to motivate the individual to review their goals which should also be flexible. Thirdly it is important to identify at the outset what are the specific obstacles (such as bad weather, lack of time) that may come in the way of the individual realising their goals, and subsequently identify how he/she will deal with them (e.g. what they will do if they miss an exercise session). The nature of these obstacles needs to be individualised and is often based on the individual's past experience. Finally it is important to acknowledge that most people will experience set-backs when trying to change their exercise behaviours and that a few missed exercise sessions does not equal failure. In other words, an all-or-nothing mentality should be avoided.'

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Notes to Editors

The University of Birmingham's School of Sport and Exercise Sciences is one of the longest established in Europe for scientific research into sport, exercise, health and rehabilitation. Research in the School underpins teaching and investigates topical issues such as the workings of the healthy body and the way in which physical activity promotes health and well-being. Thanks to a £16.4 million investment Birmingham boasts the largest custom built **Sport and Exercise Sciences facility (http://www.sportex.bham.ac.uk/about/facilities.shtml)** in the UK. This includes teaching and research laboratories for physiology, biochemistry, psychophysiology, biomechanics, sport psychology, motor skills, immunology, muscle mechanics and the neurophysiology of movement.

For further information

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