

# WELLNESSMONTHLY

Balancing Priorities for a Healthy Holiday Season | November 2024



During the holiday season, it helps to focus on moderation to maintain a healthy balance and ward off disease.

## Balancing Priorities for a Healthy Holiday Season

The winter holiday season is a time when people are reminded about the need to maintain balance in their lives. Along with the prospect of family togetherness, gift-giving, and a flurry of social activities, there are temptations to overindulge at the expense of healthy behaviors.

Setting reasonable boundaries to protect your time and reduce the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed may be necessary. Seasonal tips to help maintain your equilibrium include:

- Getting enough quality sleep
- Making wise food and beverage choices
- Sticking with your exercise routine
- Making gifts, playing music or spending time outdoors
- Doing deep breathing and taking mindful pauses to reduce stress

### Disease Risk

The importance of balance is reflected in the development of some chronic conditions, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, and certain types of cancer. For example, according to the [2024 Cancer Progress Report](#) published by the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR), studies show that 40 percent of U.S. cancer cases are attributable to preventable risk factors:

- Smoking cigarettes, 19.3 percent of cases
- Excess body weight, 7.6 percent
- Alcohol consumption, 5.4 percent
- Radiation exposure (sun, tanning beds), 4.6 percent
- Poor diet, 4.2 percent
- Infectious agents, 3.4 percent
- Physical inactivity, 3.1 percent

### Effects of Alcohol

Sometimes efforts to maintain balance involve decisions about alcohol consumption over the holidays. Many people who drink alcohol don't realize that excessive consumption increases their risk for developing six different types of cancer (head and neck, esophageal squamous cell carcinoma, and breast, colorectal, liver, and stomach). Alcohol is also linked to more than 200 diseases, the AACR reports.

Research indicates that people who reduce alcohol consumption or stop drinking altogether can decrease their risk of developing alcohol-related cancers by 8 percent and of all types of cancer by 4 percent when compared to those who sustain or increase their alcohol consumption. [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) define moderate drinking as up to two drinks per day for men and up to one drink per day for women.

Moderate drinking is generally considered low risk for most adults, but it can still have potential health impacts. A drink is equivalent to 12 ounces of beer (5 percent alcohol), 5 ounces of wine (12 percent alcohol), or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits (40 percent alcohol).

## Other Cancer Concerns

Of particular concern among public health experts are rising cases of breast, colorectal, gastric, and certain blood cancers in adults under age 50. The reasons for this are not fully understood, but lifestyle factors are likely contributors.

According to the AARC report, there is also a troubling increase in the occurrence of early-onset cancers in adolescent and young-adult populations. Research indicates this involves a combination of genetic risk factors as well as obesity, poor diet, and lack of physical activity. In the U.S., rates of early-onset colorectal cancer are expected to double by 2030 among those 29 to 35 years old. This trend may be attributed to genetics, obesity, and alcohol consumption, researchers say.

Occupations that involve shift work that disrupts sleep patterns or contact with toxic materials are linked to the development of some cancers and other diseases. Environmental risk factors, such as air pollution, water contamination, and naturally occurring radon gas, also increase a person's risk for lung cancer and some other types of cancer. In addition, there is an increasing recognition that endocrine-disrupting chemicals, such as those found in chemical hair straighteners, food packaging, and other consumer products, can increase the risk for developing certain diseases.

## Healthy Microbiome

Microorganisms (e.g., bacteria and fungi) and viruses that live in the gut, skin, mouth, and other parts of the body collectively make up the human microbiome. It's essential to be conscientious about maintaining balance within your body, even though you may not be aware of what is going on at a molecular level.

Evidence suggests that both helpful and potentially harmful microorganisms are counter-balanced in the gut microbiome, which can contribute to or help limit the spread of certain types of cancer. This interplay occurs through interactions among microorganisms, between the microbiome and a person's immune system, and through the secretion of molecules, researchers say.

Eating a diet rich in fiber from fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, and whole grains is recommended to help maintain a healthy microbiome. Other suggestions include eating fermented foods that contain probiotics (e.g., yogurt, kimchi, sauerkraut, kombucha), avoiding unnecessary antibiotic medications, prioritizing oral hygiene, and getting regular exercise and adequate rest.

## Getting Support

When you are trying to turn certain behaviors into healthy habits, it helps to get support from family members, friends, and co-workers. A buddy system is one way to stay motivated, reinforce progress toward your goals, and encourage others.

When you have difficulty sleeping or find it challenging to stop smoking, manage your weight, get enough exercise, or reduce alcohol consumption, it's advisable to seek professional support. There are many resources available, including workplace employee assistance programs and community social service agencies.

This holiday season, give yourself the gift of healthy choices and reward yourself with moderation.