

Staying Healthy Over the Holidays *in the North East LHIN*

By Dr. Paul Preston, North East LHIN Primary Care Lead

Feeling healthy is more than not getting sick.

We all have our own sense of what it means to be healthy and well – from being free of sniffles and coughs to being able to walk a flight a stairs without shortness of breath to waking up and feeling optimistic about the day.

The most commonly quoted definition of health is one penned by the World Health Organization (WHO) more than half a century ago, as “a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” The English word “health” comes from the Old English word *hale*, meaning “wholeness, being whole, sound or well.”

This holiday season I hope you experience a sense of health and wellness or sound and wholeness, whatever you prefer. There’s plenty you can do to stave off sickness, keep your body in shape, feed the social part of your being, and help your mental health too.

Go outside every day for a walk or find another form of exercise. Not only does exercise help your body but it can also help your mood, by releasing endorphins into your system, which produce feelings of well-being. While there are many outdoor sports and indoor sports that are good for you too, don’t discount the benefits of a simple walk. Just half an hour a day can both prevent and control high blood pressure that causes strokes, as well as lower your risk of type 2 diabetes and even dementia. It also feels good.

Vitamin D. All of us here in the North East can’t get enough sunshine with enough strength between September 21st and March 21st to produce this vitamin naturally. People with darker skin pigment and older adults also convert considerably less of this vitamin from the sun’s ultraviolet rays. Recent research suggests that vitamin D may have benefits in fighting infections, reducing heart disease risk factors, reducing the risk of osteoporosis, and preventing diabetes, multiple sclerosis, and some types of cancers (especially colorectal cancer). Talk to your primary care provider about what dosage might be right for you.



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Plan your party protocol. Never go to a party on an empty stomach, because you may be tempted to overindulge which won't leave you feeling healthy the next morning. Always drink a glass of water between drinks with alcohol. Guidelines from the Centre of Research and Addictions recommend healthy adults space drinks an hour apart, and drink no more than two per occasion for women and three for men. People over the age of 65 tend to have less ability to process alcohol, so take extra precaution.

Feeling Lonely? Seek out others. I know, easier said than done, especially when not everyone has a family who feeds their feeling of self-worth and lessens feelings of loneliness. Community gatherings might be a good place to start. Even spending time in the library can provide a step towards seeking out others. Most libraries offer free activities that can help connect you with others as well. Volunteering can also be tremendously rewarding.

Deal with Stress. Ongoing "stress" of the mind is well known to cause disease and poor health of the body through its effects on the autonomic nervous system, activation of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, muscle tightness and sleep disturbances. Using drugs or alcohol to deaden ourselves to these feelings, while seeming to improve things in the short term, always makes things worse in the long term. Similarly, always distracting ourselves and not dealing with the real issue, never works. We all need to find our own healthy way of dealing with stress which will include some combination of: discharging or releasing tension such as time in nature or with trusted friends, exercise or meditation, as well as dealing directly with the issue causing the stress - by facing our fears, processing what is unresolved or letting go of what we cannot control and coming to peace with it. Sometimes we may benefit from someone who is trained as a counselor or therapist to help.

Get a flu vaccination. The flu is a serious illness caused by a virus that affects 10 to 20 per cent of Canadians each year. Peak flu season tends to begin in December and last for 10 to 16 weeks. The vaccine will not only protect you, but prevents you from spreading the virus to groups at a high risk for hospitalization, including the elderly. While there are many symptoms, including fever, muscle aches and extreme fatigue, these can progress into pneumonia. Flu vaccinations are available now from most family physician offices, community health centres, walk-in clinics or pharmacies. You can use NorthEastHealthline.ca to find immunization locations near you.

Wash your hands often and clean common surfaces. Remember to do this and encourage your loved ones to do so as well, as a good defense against colds and flus. Try not to touch your face with your hands will also help as viruses tend to enter your body through your eyes, nose or mouth.

Remember to renew your medications before the holidays, but if you do get caught in a bind without your medications ... talk to your pharmacist. As part of Ontario pharmacists' expanded scope of practice, they are now able to renew or adapt some prescriptions.

Consider options for non-urgent care. If you're not feeling well and your situation is non-urgent, there are several options for care beyond your local emergency department. Contact your family physician, check the location of the nearest walk-in clinic, or get free access to a Registered Nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week through Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000 or (TTY): 1-866-797-0007.

On behalf of my colleagues here in Northeastern Ontario who provide you with health care throughout the year, I wish you and yours the very best of health and happiness for the holiday season.

Dr. Paul Preston, based in North Bay, is the Primary Care Lead with the North East Local Health Integration Network (LHIN). Dr. Preston works closely with the North East LHIN, as well as a team of other primary care providers including Sudbury-Manitoulin-Parry Sound Lead Dr. Reena Dhatt, Cochrane Lead Dr. Yves Raymond, and Algoma Hub Co-Leads Dr. David Fera and Dr. Jodie Stewart-- to strengthen and align primary care planning and help build a more accessible system of care for Northerners.

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For more information

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