

# *YOUR HEALTH*

Newsletter December 2020

 Health Partners



- **MENTAL HEALTH AND STRESS AT CHRISTMAS**
- **SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS**
- **ALCOHOL AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

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## Mental health and stress at Christmas

Christmas can be a joyful time of the year for many but for some, it can be one of the hardest times. It can bring feelings of obligation and over-commitment to social plans. Some may experience loneliness and isolation and others may find the disruption to their routines destabilising.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an uncertain time for all of us and we may have to consider a Christmas that is different to those we have had before and enjoyed. We may face some tough decisions over who we can and can't share Christmas with.



For many of us, it will mean a lot less social contact with family and friends and those who live alone may not see anyone face to face. We may have to accept that contact may be limited to a small number of people or even only by Skype, telephone, cards or email.

- Even if you cannot physically be around people, you can still remain connected to friends, family and community.
- Be kind to yourself and prioritise what is best for you over the Christmas period.
- If you are not feeling good, talking about your feelings can improve your mood and make it easier to deal with the tough times. If you don't have anyone to reach out to, look for online groups, through social media/online forums, who support one another.
- Christmas can be a great time to do something for someone else. A simple smile or a 'thank you' can help with your own wellbeing as well as theirs.
- You can always offer to start a group as well. There are probably many who would appreciate support from you, whether it means phone calls to check in, daily emails or video chats.
- And while you might feel that there is no point in sticking to a healthy lifestyle, it is now more important than ever to do so. We know that a healthier body makes it more likely you will have a healthier mind. So this is the time to get more sleep, eat better food, drink less alcohol, smoke less and exercise more.

## Social isolation and loneliness

COVID-19 has forced people to self-isolate to prevent its spread; in our efforts to stay safe, our usual ways of seeing family, friends or just familiar faces have been put on pause. As the pandemic continues, people are becoming more cut off from social contact and this can lead to feeling of loneliness. Although older people are particularly vulnerable to feeling lonely, it can affect people of all ages, particularly if they are quarantined at home.

**How does loneliness affect our health?** As humans we are social animals and we need to connect with others. Research shows that social isolation and chronic loneliness are associated with depression, cognitive decline, poor sleep quality, a weaker immune system and potential heart problems. There is also evidence that people develop poorer habits like overeating, smoking or using alcohol and drugs when they are lonely and isolated.

### What can we do to help reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness?

- **Socialising:** keeping in touch can really help. Connect using technology, whether digitally, by telephone or video link.
- **Try to stick to a routine:** getting up/having a meal at the same time each day can us feel more settled and provide a sense of normality.
- **Remain active:** evidence shows that exercising/doing physical activity can provide cognitive and mental health benefits as well as keeping anxiety and depression at bay.
- **Join an online group/class** focusing on something you enjoy, e.g. online exercise, book club, etc. Keeping your mind active can help you feel in control and less worried.
- **Sleep:** try to maintain regular sleeping patterns and keep good sleep hygiene
- **Relaxation techniques** can also help deal with feelings of anxiety.
- **Doing good is good for our mental health**, so now could be a good opportunity to help someone else who might be feeling lonely. Get in touch with someone who lives alone or might not have many relatives or close connections to check in on them. A message or a phone call could make a big difference to someone who hasn't heard from anyone in a while.

**Try to maintain communication with friends and family as much as possible. Try not to overindulge over the festive period and get outside, even if it is just for a quick walk.**

## Alcohol and substance misuse

The festive period can offer the perfect excuse to celebrate, have some fun and wind down after a busy year. Alcohol can play a major role during this time; however, it is important to be aware of the risks of excessive alcohol consumption.

Much of our social culture is centred on eating and drinking, especially alcohol. For many, alcohol is considered an essential purchase when shopping.

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists the number of people drinking at 'high risk' levels has doubled to almost 8.5 million since February 2020 (along with an increase in opiate addiction). The problem is rife amongst those earning middle incomes, where more than four in ten are now consuming too much alcohol. Problem drinking also increased among blue collar workers, up from c.15% to 31% over the same period. The increase is being driven by factors including lockdown, anxiety about the pandemic and job uncertainty.

Drinking alcohol might seem like a way of relaxing or taking your mind off things but if you drink more than 14 units a week, it can negatively affect your health. Drinking at high levels not only makes people more likely to become alcohol dependent, but many will develop other health problems including liver disease, stomach ulcers, pancreatitis and depression. In fact, drinking regularly - even at low levels - can raise the risk of a host of health problems.



Alcohol is also a depressant and regular, heavy drinking interferes with chemicals in the brain that are key for good mental health. Feeling relaxed after a drink is short-lived, whereas over time, alcohol can have an impact on your mental health and can contribute to feelings of depression and anxiety.

Now might be a good time cut down or stop drinking to improve your overall health, including your immunity. Check how much you are drinking:

[www.alcoholchange.org.uk/alcohol-facts/interactive-tools/check-your-drinking](http://www.alcoholchange.org.uk/alcohol-facts/interactive-tools/check-your-drinking)

Use the following tips to help stay in control when you drink alcohol:

- **Avoid drinking on an empty stomach.** Having food in your stomach helps slow the rate that alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream. Eating can also slow your rate of drinking but avoid eating too many salty party snack foods which can encourage you to drink more quickly.
- **Try alternating** alcoholic drinks with water or other non-alcoholic drinks.
- **Add plenty of mixer** to your drinks to make them last longer.
- **Stop the top ups.** You may lose count of how many you have had.
- **Avoid drinking alone.** When you pour your own measures rather than paying for measures individually, you may not notice how much you are drinking.
- **Some beverages will contain more than one standard drink:** take this into account when calculating your intake for the evening, particularly if you are driving.
- **Don't mix alcohol** with any other drugs, including prescription medication.

As well as the NHS, there are many charities and support groups providing support and advice if you think you/someone close to you may have a problem:

- AlcoholChange: call 0300 123 1110 (weekdays 9am to 8pm, weekends 11am to 4pm). [www.alcoholchange.org.uk/help-and-support/get-help-now](http://www.alcoholchange.org.uk/help-and-support/get-help-now)
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA): [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/)
- Al-Anon Family Groups: [www.al-anonuk.org.uk/](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk/)
- We are with You: UK-wide treatment agency to manage the effects of drug and alcohol misuse. [www.wearewithyou.org.uk/](http://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/)

**Christmas can be expensive!** And with the addition of the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be a doubly worrying time. You can use your EAP, if you have one, for advice or a range of free tools, e.g. [www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/tools/money-navigator-tool](http://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/tools/money-navigator-tool)

If you have debts, speaking to someone can seem daunting. However, 50% of people with debt issues have mental health problems and burying your head in the sand will make the problem worse and increase the risk of your health being affected. There are many ways to clear your debts and some are more well-known than others. The one that is best for you will depend on your personal circumstances.