

For December 1998

Heart to Heart Talk

With Philip S. Chua, M.D.

Christmas Ailments

Is there an illness called Christmas Disease?

Yes, there is, but it has nothing to do with the Christmas season. Christmas Disease is a blood disease, also known as Hemophilia B or factor IX hemophilia. It is a hereditary bleeding disorder due to deficiency in coagulation factor IX. This condition is X-linked recessive inheritance, affecting only males, and occurs in 1 in 100,000 male births. This illness causes spontaneous bleeding in the joints.

What is Christmas Blues?

Christmas Blues is a form of mild depression (known as SAD: Seasonal Affective Disorder) that happens to some of us, normal and healthy people, during the Christmas season and other seasonal festive events. Empty nest syndrome, where the grown up or married children have left home, creating an empty and lonely feeling in the parents, especially the mothers, is one such type of emotion that is magnified by family occasions like Christmas, New Year, birthdays, etc. Frequent visits from the children or family reunions during the holidays minimize these “blues” and provide a sense of parental security and happiness, especially among the elderly parents. The other common cause of this extreme sadness is poor financial situation in life, where self-pity, panic, a sense of hopelessness and helplessness prevail especially on a holiday like Christmas.

Is guilt more common at Christmastime?

Yes, somehow this season of the birth of Christ, according to psychologists, brings out in most of us our good and better qualities, such as a more youthful exuberance, honesty, sincerity, compassion and humanity. During this season, many of us become more critical of ourselves and our past actions (sins of omission or commission against our parents, siblings or friends, or our less privileged fellowmen) and hence the

feeling of guilt is more common on this holiday, and also a contributing factor to Christmas Blues.

Are accidents and injuries more common during Christmas season?

Yes, and the reason is obvious. There are more activities going on everywhere, at home, on the streets, in stores, etc., so there are more people, more traffic, and this lends to a higher prevalence of accidents and injuries. Alcoholic consumption is increased, people light firecrackers, people climb to install Christmas lights, children play with these lights or with lit candles, more cooking takes place in the kitchen, and all these are potential sources of accidents and injuries. Most hospital Emergency Rooms in America are more than 75% busier during the Christmas season and the New Year's eve celebration. Compared to all holidays, New Year's day has the greatest increase in traffic fatalities (64%), about 40% of these involving drunk drivers.

Is diarrhea more prevalent during the Christmas season?

Yes, just as diarrhea is also more common during Fiesta celebrations. Ingestion of either contaminated food, or food that is spoiled (especially those left exposed to the warm weather or room temperature, and not refrigerated right away after meals) are the usual causes of diarrhea. Common food contaminants are Staphylococcus Aureus, E. Coli, and Amoeba, and water contaminants are (non-typhoidal) Salmonella and Shigella. Staphylococcal Food Poisoning is due to the enterotoxins produced by the Staph bacteria. The diarrhea, sometimes accompanied by stomach cramps, vomiting, headache, and fever, starts about 2 to 8 hours after eating contaminated food. The potential outbreak is high when the food handlers with skin (staphylococcus aureus) infection, touch and contaminate foods left at room temperature. Proper food handling, dishwashing, and hand-washing are hygienic practices that will significantly minimize, if not prevent, these bacterial and parasitic contaminations. When the diarrhea persists for more than two days, consult your physician.

How long could food be left safely at room temperature?

Different types of food have different "spoilage time." Fish, processed meat, cream-filled pastries, custards, fruits salads, noodles (pancit), food cooked with tomatoes provide good media for bacterial growth after more than 6 hours of exposure to room temperature, depending on how warm the ambient temperature is. Some dishes, like adobo or paksiw could last for even a week in room temperature without spoiling, unless contaminated by handlers. The prudent thing to do is to refrigerate the left overs as soon

as the meal is completed. Those who do not have a refrigerator should not cover the food airtight, since this will not allow the food “to breathe” and would tend to increase the heat and pressure, leading to a much shorter “spoilage time.” If using a plastic wrap, poke a few holes on it to allow for a better ventilation. Keep the food in an ice box or in the coldest part of the house, and eat it within 24 hours.

Are those drinking alcoholic beverages “better protected” from this diarrhea?

To some extent, yes, but the dose of the enterotoxins determines the potential seriousness of the condition. Imbibing alcoholic drinks during a (contaminated) meal does not confer guaranteed immunity from these bacterial or parasitic diarrheas. The low alcohol content of all these drinks is not enough to “sterilize” our gastrointestinal tract.

Why do a lot of people take antacids during the holidays

More people take antacids (Tums, Rolaid, Alka Seltzer, Tagamet, Pepcid, etc) during or after the holidays because of overindulgence in alcohol or food, leading to heartburns and /or indigestion. These medications (alkali) counteract the high acid contents of the stomach following these binges during holidays and fiestas.

What is Chinese Food Syndrome?

This condition could sometimes mimic a heart attack. It causes chest pains, facial pressure, and burning sensations throughout the body, sometimes with dizziness or fainting. This phenomenon is a pharmacologic reaction to monosodium glutamate (MSG or betsin), a popular white powder food seasoning used in cooking. The symptoms are not really due to an allergic reaction and is dose-related. Most people are not bothered by MSG, but some react to it more severely. Although death is very rare with this syndrome, a surgeon classmate of mine, who was attending a meeting in France a few years ago, had so violent a reaction after ingesting food with monosodium glutamate that he expired within an hour thereafter. Those who develop any of the four symptoms enumerated above after eating food cooked with MSG should clearly request chefs or cooks in restaurants, at home, or anywhere else, not to use MSG in preparing their food. Because of this syndrome, most Chinese (and other) restaurants today no longer use MSG. If in doubt, ask the manager or waiters, and instruct them accordingly.

What is Holiday Heart Syndrome?

Prevalent during holidays, this symptom complex is mainly characterized by cardiac arrhythmias (heart rhythm irregularity), mostly due to alcoholic binges. The excitement brought on by the festivities and ingestion of a lot of caffeine (coffee, chocolate, cola drinks) during the holidays could also play a role in this syndrome.
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**To
all our loyal
readers and friends:
Have a safe and wonderful Christmas.
May the New Year bring you and your loved ones
peace, good health, happiness
and
prosperity.**

Philip S. Chua, M.D. is Cardiac Surgeon Emeritus based in Northwest Indiana, U.S.A., where he practiced thoracic-cardiovascular surgery since 1972 after his Cardiac Surgery Fellowship at the Texas Heart Institute in Houston, Texas, under the world-renowned heart transplant surgeon, Dr. Denton A. Cooley. Dr. Chua is currently the Chairman of Cardiovascular Surgery of the Cebu Cardiovascular Center in Cebu City, which he and his “flying heart team” from the United States helped establish in 1997 in partnership with Dr. Potenciano V. Larrazabal, Jr., Chairman/President of the Cebu Doctors’ Hospital. He travels from Chicago about every other month to join his local cardiac team at the Cebu Cardiovascular Center. His email address is heart@chua.net

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