

Fifteen Christmas traditions to keep going all year round for a healthier 2019

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Lifestyle

Christmas may come just once a year, but here's why you should try sticking with these healthy festive customs the whole year round

By

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Be more child-like

“On Christmas Day, when the Twister mat is laid out or Aunt Dorothy suggests a game of charades, it doesn't take us long to find the child within,” says life coach and author Angela Cox.

“Yet, we tend to pack our seven-year-old selves away with the decorations and return to being an adult – pressing pause on our fun side for another year. This year, try to keep laughing and show your silly side a little more often.”

...and play more board games

Board games allow us to get together and strengthen bonds with family and friends. There's a feel-good element to sitting around a table and having some light-hearted competition with people you care about.

It helps to release endorphins which not only make you feel good, but can relieve stress. Meanwhile, getting children into board games helps them to build essential cognitive skills, such as problem solving.

Also, it means the children spend less time trying to kill each other on the PS4!

Sing out loud

According to research, as well as building confidence and improving mental health, singing carols can bring physical benefits as well.

Apparently, belting out a tune can help to increase lung capacity and strengthen the muscles used in the breathing process to inspire stronger, more controlled breaths.

It's beneficial if you have a lung condition such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), in which the airways are narrow or obstructed.

The British Lung Foundation runs Singing for Lung Health groups across the UK. See blf.org.uk for details.



Belting out a tune can help to increase lung capacity - another good reason to unleash your inner Adele (Image: Getty Images/Blend Images)

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Cook from scratch

“During the festive season many families sit down to feasts of roasted meats, colourful veggies and homemade recipes,” says Angela.

When we don’t have the pressures of our usual commitments like work and school, there’s more opportunity to cook from scratch, which is healthier.

Alison adds: “But all too often the lure of convenience foods means our microwaves are pinging again as soon as the New Year chimes stop ringing.

“Make a change and take the essence of creating healthy meals from scratch into 2019, that way you will benefit from the additional vitamins, minerals and fibre in fresh produce all year.”

Keep eating sprouts

“Most of us only ever eat sprouts once a year, but turning this traditional food into a staple can have a positive effect on your health,” says Abbas Kanani, pharmacist at online pharmacy Chemist Click.

“Brussels sprouts are high in anti-oxidants, especially kaempferol, which has been proven to reduce the growth of cancer cells, improve heart health and reduce inflammation. They’re also high in fibre which can curb constipation and regulate insulin levels.”

A turkey isn’t just for Christmas

“Turkey remains the nation’s first festive choice – with around eight out of 10 families eating it on December 25,” says Abbas.

Like sprouts, however, many of us won’t eat it again until Santa visits the following year. Yet turkey is a rich source of protein and – without the skin – it is low in fat too.

“It’s also a source of iron, zinc, potassium and phosphorus, plus vitamin B6 and niacin, which are both essential for the body’s energy production,” she adds.

... nor are cranberries

Instead of just having cranberries with Christmas lunch, make a winter salad of mixed leaves, roasted squash, topped with grilled halloumi cheese and a drizzle of cranberry sauce, says nutritionist Jane Michell.

You can also add cranberry sauce to sandwiches. “It’s high in health-boosting vitamins C, K and A,” says Jane.



Cranberries are high in vitamins C, K and A - so there's no reason to put them away after December (Image: Getty)

Be a nutcracker

Don't just buy bags of whole nuts during the festive season, keep them on your shopping list all year round.

They're packed with healthy fats and nutrients, and are far better for you than packs of salted, flavoured peanuts. Having to crack the nut before you eat it is a perfect way to keep portion size under control – and it can also provide you with a great tension release!

Embrace your loved ones...

Literally. With the mistletoe hanging, Christmas is spent doling out more hugs than ever as we spend time reconnecting with extended family – and it seems the personal touch has benefits that mean we should stay touchy-feely all year around.

According to scientist and author Dr Paul Zak (otherwise known as Dr Love), hugging is a simple way to keep the happiness hormone oxytocin flowing, which helps to reduce cardiovascular stress and improves immune system performance.

Just 'be'

All year we are slaves to to-do lists dictated by our work schedules and the endless number of

tasks we need to get done, says Angela.

“At Christmas, even if only for a few days, we can slow down, switch off from work and are able to simply ‘be’.

“There is a lesson here for us all. Carve out an hour or so to just ‘be’ every week, and give your brain a chance to switch off.”

Donate

“Giving is one of the things in life that is mutually beneficial,” says Angela.

“The recipient feels great and the giver does too.” Apparently kindness changes our brain chemistry. It boosts levels of dopamine and serotonin, which are chemical messengers involved with positive emotions.

It also produces mood-boosting oxytocin and endorphins.

“The Christmas period sees many of us donating food to food banks or our time to local charities, and this is something that can be continued throughout the year to benefit others who are in need and give you a sense of satisfaction,” Angela adds.

Walk and talk

“The annual family post-Christmas lunch stroll is a great opportunity to grab a quiet conversation with loved ones, take in the sights, breathe fresh air and burn off the trifle,” says Angela.

“Making this a regular event, perhaps every weekend, is a great way to stay connected, keep fit and notice the changes as the seasons progress.”



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Have a bit of faith

Attending a church, mosque or synagogue can have a positive long-term effect on mental health, according to a US study.

Scientists found that men and women aged 40 to 65 years old who attend church or other houses of worship, cut their risk for mortality by 55%.

Set goals

Although many resolutions fail before the end of January, thinking about possible health improvements after Christmas is a good thing. But, say experts, focus on specific goals rather than vague resolutions.

Resolving to just 'get fit' can mean you never really know if you've actually achieved what you set out to do. Deciding to work out three times a week, however, is an actionable, trackable goal.

Engage more

"We are brilliant at engaging with loved ones over the festive holidays," says Angela. "Sharing laughs, hugs and stories with those close to us is a perfect way to relax. But as soon as the daily routine kicks back in we can often forget how good it feels to spend quality time with

family.

“In 2019, aim to create more space in your life to socialise with others, share meals or even simply call those you might not see until next Christmas.”