

Leisure

Britain is a nation that tends to value work over play. Consumer research by market intelligence agency Mintel, found that over a third of UK workers have less than two hours of spare time on a typical weekday, while only three in ten think they have achieved a good balance between work and leisure time. Despite the fact that so many people are working such long hours – an average of 39 hours a week for full-time workers – only one in five would choose to work fewer hours for more free time, if it meant earning less money¹³.

If your free time is so limited, it's all the more important that you make the most of it.

ISSUES:

- Having a fit holiday
- Controlling your drinking
- Quitting smoking
- Working out



Have a fit holiday

It's not just about looking trim on the beach, but avoiding the tummy upsets that can make so many foreign holidays miserable. A survey conducted by Yakult showed that 70% of people have had a holiday hampered by a bug¹⁴. The risk of you developing traveller's diarrhoea is between 5–10% for places such as North America, Northern Europe, Australia and New Zealand but rises to 50% in such places as North Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia.

Before you travel, see your GP to check if any vaccinations are needed. Vaccines needed for some destinations could take a few months to become effective and others need two or three shots. Check the website www.nathnac.org for detailed health and vaccine information for every country around the world. Make sure your travel insurance covers you for all medical eventualities. If you're holidaying in Europe, you'll need to carry the new EHIC card (it replaces the old E111 form) to be entitled to medical treatment. Apply online at www.dh.gov.uk/en/Healthcare

Ask the expert

Look after your gut: Before going on holiday try to improve the health of your gut through your diet. Consider including prebiotic foods like asparagus, onions and artichokes as well as eating a well-balanced diet and taking a probiotic product regularly.

Drink water: Drink plenty of bottled water and juice throughout your holiday, particularly when in the sun and on the plane where dry cabin air can dehydrate you.

Get moving: On the plane try to move around, even while sitting in your seat to avoid discomfort.

Sleep well: If you are due to take a long-haul flight you can minimise the effects of jet lag by getting a good night's rest for a few nights running before departure, and a good sensibly planned sleep on arrival.

Dr Anthony R Leeds, University of Surrey



While on holiday follow our guide to holiday hygiene:

Avoiding travellers' tummy upsets

- **Fluids:** Keep well hydrated and make sure that water is from sealed bottles or cans to be sure it is pure and uncontaminated.
- **Fruit and veg:** Peel or wash well with bottled water before eating.
- **Salads:** Don't eat salads washed in water in high risk areas unless the water source is pure.
- **Ice:** Say "no" to ice in drinks unless it is made from purified or bottled water.
- **Meat:** Check before eating to be sure it is well cooked.
- **Seafood:** Make sure its been cooked, boiled and peeled. Have a good sniff before eating – if it smells bad, it could be bad news for your tummy!
- **First aid:** Take plasters and insect creams as well as constipation and diarrhoea remedies including rehydration powders in case you get diarrhoea. Good, comprehensive first aid kits are available from most chemists.

Also take care in the sun! Make sure you don't burn by using high factor +15 sunscreens, taking special care over easy-to-forget danger areas such as shoulders, backs of necks and heads of thinning hair. Get used to the sun gradually, retiring to the shade at the hottest part of the day. Look out for any moles that change in shape or colour or any unusual skin blemishes as these can, according to Cancer Research UK, be indicators of a more serious problem.

Controlling your drinking

At the end of a hard day, enjoying a cold beer or that first warming sip of a glass of wine is a wonderful way to relax. But do we know when to stop? According to the Office for National Statistics, over seven million people in the UK drink more alcohol than is good for them, with 1.8 million drinking dangerously in excess of 35–50 units per week. One in ten male drinkers and one in every twenty women who drink have a problem with alcohol.

Official advice is that men should drink no more than 21 units of alcohol per week; women no more than 14. One 'unit' equates to a single measure of spirits, a small glass of wine or a half-pint of lager, beer or cider. Making choices will soon be easier thanks to a voluntary agreement between the government and the drinks industry. New labels carrying health warnings detailing the number of units and advice on safe drinking, will appear on alcoholic drinks sold in Britain by the end of 2008.



Overindulging in alcohol is a risk factor for a wide range of illnesses, and is damaging to almost every organ of the body: the kidneys, heart, brain – and not least the digestive system. Heavy drinking is blamed for 33,000 UK deaths each year, and is responsible for between 20 and 30% of accidents worldwide as well as being a factor in the rise in sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. While a single heavy night on the booze can cause a bout of gastroenteritis, habitual drinkers are at greater risk of mouth and upper digestive tract cancers and weakened bones because alcohol limits calcium absorption. But how can we abstain more easily?

How to drink less

- Offer to be the designated driver. That way you can safely opt not to drink.
- Start the night with soft drinks. It should then be easier to pace yourself.
- Drink water between every alcoholic drink.
- Eat before you drink. Alcohol is absorbed faster on an empty stomach.
- Get to choose. Choose orange juices, lemonade, tonic water or cola – no one need know that there are no spirits in there.
- Dilute your units. Mix wine with sparkling water, or have a shandy instead of a beer.

Quitting smoking

The number of smokers in Britain is thankfully declining. Currently 22% of Britons enjoy a cigarette, down from 27% at the end of the 1990s with one-third of these wanting to kick the habit.

Did you know that, as well as harming the lungs, smoking can damage the digestive system? It contributes to disorders such as heartburn and peptic ulcers, and can increase the risk of Crohn's disease. Cigarettes and alcohol combined are doubly bad news – smoking decreases the liver's ability to handle alcohol and increases the risk of mouth cancer. But addiction to nicotine makes it hard to quit. Nicotine withdrawal symptoms include cravings, irritability, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, restlessness and disturbed sleep.

But however long you've been smoking, you'll be glad you gave up, say researchers at Harvard medical school in Boston. Their 20-year study of 100,000 women smokers found that for those who kicked the habit, health began to improve almost immediately. After 20 smoke-free years their history no longer had any effect on their risks¹⁵.



Ask the expert

Make a date: Set a specific date for stopping ... and stop on that date!

Buddy up: Ask a friend or colleague to also stop, for mutual support.

Chuck it out: Throw away any smoking 'paraphernalia' – lighters, ashtrays, etc.

Take it slow: Take it one day at a time; don't think 'I can never smoke again', but instead, simply 'I will not smoke tomorrow.'

Take a break: Change your routine so as to eliminate all the 'cigarette breaks' that have previously slotted into the day.

Save the cash: Save up the money normally spent on cigarettes and put it towards something special. 20 cigarettes a day, means saving around £2,000 per year!

Get advice: Make an appointment with the GP – there's lots of advice and support available free on the NHS.

Dr Julian Kenyon, www.doveclinic.com



Working out

Why exercise? The benefits of doing regular physical activity include a reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, bowel cancer, breast cancer, osteoporosis and obesity. In addition, exercise helps you to control your weight, and is also thought to help ease stress, anxiety, and depression.

Research focus

According to recent research from King's College London, people who exercise more in their free time appear to be biologically younger than their more sedentary counterparts. The researchers measured ageing at a molecular level by analysing telomeres, tiny structures which cap the end of chromosomes in our cells and protect them from damage. With age, our telomeres shorten, leaving us more susceptible to cell damage, and so disease. Lifestyle factors such as smoking and obesity also result in shorter telomeres. But the investigators found a significant association between increasing physical activity and longer telomere length which suggests that regular exercise could preserve our youthful ability to resist disease.

Ask the expert

Adults should do a minimum of 30 minutes moderate-intensity physical activity, five days a week. As a general rule, exercise of moderate intensity will make you a little warm or sweaty, and slightly out of breath, but no more.

Exercise doesn't need to be in extreme bursts – so the half hour could be split up during the day (morning, lunchtime and evening for instance). And it can be a 'lifestyle activity' (in other words, walking to the shops or taking the dog out).

People who are at specific risk from obesity, or who need to manage their weight because of a medical condition, need 45–60 minutes of exercise at least five times a week.

Vary your exercise – do flexibility exercises such as yoga or pilates, aerobic exercises such as walking or swimming and anaerobic exercises such as weight bearing exercises.

Sophie Christy, Director of Fitness, West Hants Club



Research focus

There has been some research into whether probiotics can help people taking short or long bouts of strenuous exercise. Probiotics will not improve sports performance, but there is interest in whether they can help support the gut and the body's natural defences during these times. Athletes often experience digestive problems, and their exercise regime can make them generally more susceptible to minor illnesses. In 2006, researchers at Loughborough University reported a small trial with cyclists who drank two bottles of Yakult and then cycled for two hours. Tests showed that when the cyclists were taking the probiotic, their T cells – part of the immune system and the cells that recognise and deal with infections – were improved¹⁶. The implications of this preliminary research need to be confirmed in further large scale trials.

