



Avoiding the Holiday Blues

by Lori Hartwell

You walk into your local grocery store and you're bombarded with holiday cheer: "Winter Wonderland" gives way to "Frosty the Snowman" over the loudspeaker, even though you're in sunny Southern California and it's warm enough to wear flip flops. Every aisle is littered with holiday snacks that companies have spent millions of dollars advertising in order to get you to buy them. Unfortunately, the fact that none of the choices are renal friendly doesn't stop your taste buds from salivating in anticipation. For a moment, you think that maybe you should get a few bags to take to that holiday party you were invited to, but you already know that tons of goodies on the forbidden list will be provided and that adding more temptation to the buffet table isn't going to help you get a good lab report. The next stop is the checkout stand. You leaf through the magazines as you wait for the line to inch forward. No matter which magazine you pick up, alcohol promotion is everywhere. Having to abide by a fluid limit and knowing that alcohol doesn't mix with the 15+ meds you take makes the bah-humbug effect start to set in. Depression is the often unwelcome guest that invites itself into your life at this time of year and wreaks havoc. Holiday stress, anxiety, family-related issues, loneliness, and unrealistic expectations can make you feel like Ebenezer Scrooge himself.

Here are a few tips I've picked up along the way to help overcome the blues that sometimes accompany the holidays:

Food

A restricted diet can put a damper on any holiday party, and I've learned that if I don't know which types of food could be there to tempt me, I'd better eat before I go. I've also found it helpful to bring a dish or appetizer that I can eat. If a family member or friend is hosting the party, it's a great opportunity to educate him or her about the renal diet I've often asked the person hosting an event what I could bring because I was on a special diet. This usually prompts a question about the types of food I can eat and the offer to make something yummy that all the guests can enjoy without making my dietitian go into hysterics.

Alcohol

My nephrologist has never told me that I couldn't have a drink. The advice I was given is that if I do drink, to do so in moderation and to avoid mixing alcohol with my medications. I was further told to learn what the potassium and phosphorus levels in particular beverages are and to count alcohol in my daily fluid allotment. For example, I like a glass of red wine. A typical 3.5-oz glass has 5 mg of sodium, 82 mg of potassium, and 14 mg of phosphorus. Make it a point to discuss the whole question of drinking alcohol with your doctor.

Holiday Blues

People are under a lot of pressure to be joyful during the holidays, and sometimes I feel bad because I'm not Ho, Ho, Ho-ing along with everyone else. I know that I'm going to be much more emotional during the holidays and I have to be prepared so I don't go into a funk. The key for me is engaging in a creative activity, such as making cards, holiday ornaments, or presents for my friends. When I visit family, I always have a game or activity in mind to help connect on a positive level. This helps prevent family members from gossiping, which can be stressful too. It's also important to plan events that you look forward to. I can't think of anything more fun than planning to see a movie with my husband and inviting our friends to join us. And one quick way to feel joy is to smile and make eye contact with people and wish them a Happy Holiday. Open the door at the mall for a stranger, let another driver have a parking spot, and spread holiday cheer by your actions. You'll feel better for it.

Lori Hartwell, founder & President of the Renal Support Network (RSN), was diagnosed with kidney disease at the age of two. In 1993 she founded RSN to instill "health, happiness and hope" into the lives of those affected by chronic kidney disease. Lori is also the author of the book "Chronically Happy: Joyful Living in Spite of Chronic Illness" and is a four-time kidney transplant recipient.