



Planning and imagining all that needs to be done in the run-up to Christmas can leave us exhausted even before the first Brussel sprout is in the pot. Yet it's at this time of year that being active can make big a difference. By keeping your activity levels high and stress levels low, you can feel more in control and more able to cope with the demands of the festive season. This year, things are going to be different.

Let's start with shopping. Rather than the usual marathon that saps your strength and makes you never want to venture to the shops again – at least not until the January sales – try thinking of a shopping trip as a series of mini walks. When there's a break in the crowds, stride out and get your heart pumping – you'll feel less hassled and boost your energy levels. Add in regular planned breaks to prevent you becoming overly tired; reduce back ache, renew activity levels and give you time to assess your present-buying progress. These breaks can put the joy back into Christmas. For extra activity, add stair or escalator climbing – hard work, but they give your legs a break from the 'shopping shuffle'.

And it's not just the legs that can get a work out. As others seethe and fume in queues, try a series of three-second buttock-clenching exercises – great for toning pelvic muscles, they will bring a smile to your face.

Make time for walks outside as well – the fresh air will revive you and enable you to return to your planning with renewed enthusiasm. Remember to prevent extra heart work if you decide to walk after a meal – do the washing-up first to allow food to digest. If it's cold or windy and you have angina, make sure you wrap up warmly.

It's not all about exercise, though. Planning is important and by changing the way you would normally do things could mean a huge reduction in stress.

Take your Christmas card list – a chore of epic proportions. Thin it out to save time, the environment and your blood pressure. Start by crossing out those people you see regularly – you can always wish them 'Season's Greetings' when you see them. Next, remove people you send a card to simply because they send you a card – especially if you haven't seen them for years and have no intention of doing so. Also, why send a card if you give a gift? This probably rules out cards for family and good friends, many of whom you will see over Christmas or talk to on the phone anyway. Believe me, the guilt doesn't last long and the relief is immense. If you have local cards to deliver then it's time to get walking!

If you do find it's all getting too much, try adding physical effort to your cooking. Using arm power rather than electricity to mix cakes or whisk will work forgotten muscles and does wonders for aggression relief!

With these and other endless opportunities like those on the list, this time of year can be fun and less demanding without the need for a holiday to recover and lose those extra pounds afterwards.

THE GOOSE OR YOU?

At this time of year, it's a familiar story – your life gets put on hold as 'operation Christmas' takes over. Healthy eating and regular exercise go out the window and it's not only the goose that ends up getting fat!

STRESS BUSTERS

- ★ Reduce your Christmas card list and hand deliver as many cards as possible
- ★ Walk up escalators or take the stairs when present-hunting
- ★ Use local Park and Ride schemes to reduce parking anxiety and increase activity levels
- ★ Build breaks into your shopping expeditions
- ★ Squeeze and relax your backside as you wait in queues
- ★ To reduce swollen ankles, elevate your feet after your shopping trips
- ★ Use a hand whisk to beat and mix rather than your electric one, great for the arms
- ★ Allow food to digest by washing-up before going for your long, after-lunch walk
- ★ Keep yourself warm by covering your mouth with a scarf when you are walking on a cold or windy day

THREE TO TRY:

Improve your flexibility and balance with these exercises. Remember, if you do not exercise regularly, check with your GP before starting an exercise programme. Always stop exercising if you feel dizzy, unwell or if there is any pain.



Towel arm curls

A good exercise to firm arms. Holding a towel taut between your hands and keeping elbows into your sides, bring the towel from your thighs towards your shoulders. Keep your legs moving and breathe in as you raise the arms and exhale as you lower them. Try doing a set of 12-15 repetitions.



Hip stretch

A great stretch for the inner legs and thighs. With a secure chair, sit across it and slide one leg forwards and the other one back until you feel a stretch in the rear leg. Look forwards and breathe throughout. Hold for 15 seconds, then repeat on the other leg.



Wall balancing

This is great for improving balance. One for the end of your cool down. Using a wall for support, lift your outside leg up and hold for 20 seconds. Repeat on the other leg. Progress by closing your eyes. When you are confident, move away from the wall starting with your eyes open again.