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Holiday Fitness Program

You're busy, you're stressed, it's chilly out ... so why not just take a break from your fitness program until the New Year? Sure, you can always come up with an excuse not to exercise. But slacking off on your fitness program during the holidays will only leave you with more pounds -- and more stress -- come New Year's. Fitness experts recognize that this time of year is difficult for many people trying to stick to an exercise program, so they have some suggestions to keep you motivated and disciplined. It's important to keep fitness a priority in your schedule, says Rich Ray, chairman of the Kinesiology Department at Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

Here are some expert tips for staying fit during the time-crunched, temptation-packed holiday season:

- Be flexible when your days get busy, Ray advises. Instead of simply blowing off your 5 p.m. trip to the gym in favor of an office party at the same time, wake up an hour early and walk or jog before work. Or fit a brisk walk into your lunch hour.
- Mix up your routine to avoid boredom. "If you usually run four days a week, try running once, swimming once, and lifting weights twice," Ray says. "The novelty of the new exercise will hopefully be a stronger motivator than the 'need' to do something else during your normal exercise time."
- To save time, Ray recommends combining exercising and family commitments. For example, hauling the kids up a hill a few times can make a sledding trip as beneficial as a jog. Taking the family snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, or on a backpacking trip will provide exercise as well as quality time with loved ones.
- New York-based exercise physiologist and personal trainer Louis Coraggio advises his clients to book a long weekend getaway at a warm destination for January or February. This will motivate you to keep exercise a priority. When you're tempted to slack off, envision yourself looking good on the beach.
- Create a holiday wish list for one or more improved body area(s), Coraggio suggests. Expect this to take a certain amount of sacrifice. Keep your discipline constant.
- Be ready for the mistletoe, says Coraggio. People are attracted to a strong, healthy body. Your confidence will show if you've been keeping up with your eating and exercise habits.
- Coraggio recommends creating a home workout routine for those times you can't make it to the gym. Crunches, push-ups, and many other exercises can be done without any gym equipment.
- Increase your time management skills over the holiday season. Organize your day the evening before. Prioritizing your tasks beforehand will help you find time to exercise. Each week, make it a priority to fit in three exercise sessions.
- Walking is an exercise that can go anywhere, from the woods to the mall, says health and lifestyle coach Jackie Keller, author of *Body After Baby: The Simple 30-Day Plan to Lose Your Baby Weight*. "Always have a pair of running or walking shoes with you, along with a set of light, hand-held weights, and a clean pair of socks," Keller suggests. "If all else fails, you have the minimum equipment necessary to get in a walk." Another Keller suggestion: add a heavy book to a backpack to make your walk more challenging.

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