



Holiday without the headache

Stress reliever or inducer? Here's what a holiday does to your body

BY EVELINE GAN

While some people swear by the restorative effects of an overseas holiday, why does that dreaded cold seem to befall some of us whenever we are due for a holiday?

Clinical psychologist Ms Vyda S Chai from Think Psychological Services said that is because our mind and body are closely linked. If you're a workaholic, the effects of a pending holiday might be even more obvious.

"Research has proven that an individual's psychological state has a direct impact on his physiological condition," explained Ms Chai. "In the case of workaholics, they may face particular difficulty when they transition from work to a holiday environment as their body crashes from the loss of adrenaline." Adrenaline is a hormone the body produces in response to strong emotions.

Still, that should not put you off your long overdue break. In the long run, taking regular breaks may improve your overall health and well-being.

According to research conducted by Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies, regular holidays are linked to a lower risk of health issues like heart attacks and depression, and may even improve brain health.

Learn how your body reacts to a holiday, and how to avoid any negative effects before you go on a much-needed break.

PHOTO: ISTOCK

THE PRE-HOLIDAY SYNDROME

1. The happiness boost

The very act of planning a vacation has been found to boost moods and happiness levels, according to a study published in the *Applied Research in Quality of Life* in 2010. Netherlands researchers measured happiness levels in over 1,500 adults and found that the anticipation of a vacation boosted happiness for eight weeks.

TIP REST AND RELAX

Plan your holiday with relaxation in mind. Ms Chai said: "I know people who plan activities from the minute they arrive. This doesn't let your body acclimatise to the new surroundings or even rest. The holiday almost becomes like a business trip."

2. The adrenaline rush

So much work, so little time. As you're counting down the days and hours to your beach holiday, the pile of workload on your desk seems to grow larger. Your body reacts to the challenge with a burst of adrenaline that leaves you feeling — oddly enough — energetic and invincible.

"What many people don't realise is that adrenaline not only boosts energy but also improves our immune system temporarily," said Ms Chai.

3. Your body crashes

Ms Chai said that once adrenaline stops pumping, there is a temporary drop in the immune system that makes a person prone to sickness. "It's not uncommon for workaholics to fail to notice early warning signs of impending illness because they are too consumed with their work," she added.

Skipping meals and skimping on sleep may have left you more susceptible to illness. They may worsen existing chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, added Dr Raymond Choy, general practitioner at Raffles Medical at Changi Airport Terminal 3.

TIP BEFORE YOU TRAVEL

- **Keep your immune system healthy**
Strengthen your immunity by eating regular meals that are high in fibre and protein, and low in carbohydrate, suggested Dr Choy. Vitamins B and C can boost the immune system, he added. Research shows that dehydration negatively impacts brain function and cognitive ability. In some cases, links have been made between de-

hydration and depression, said Ms Chai. Excessive coffee can overwork the adrenal glands that may lead to more stress, she added.

● Get sufficient sleep

Lack of sleep activates your stress glands, so get at least seven to nine hours of sleep each night. Ms Chai suggested meditation, yoga and massage to relax and improve sleep quality.

● Keep an eye on your stress levels

According to Ms Chai, exercise is a known stress-reliever, and it doesn't have to be strenuous — an evening walk works well. Mini-breaks during the day can lower stress levels. For instance, take a few deep breaths and clear your mind between tasks.

● Schedule a doctor's appointment

Even if you're not ill, consider going for a general health check-up before your holiday to check if you require any travel vaccinations or medical advice, said Dr Choy. For instance, frequent travellers are usually recommended to have flu vaccines, especially when travelling to crowded places, he added.

YOUR HOLIDAY COMMENCES

4. Inflight woes

Your lowered immunity may worsen or magnify complaints like motion sickness and colds during air travel. Dehydration — one of the most common issues while travelling by air — could leave you feeling worse for wear.

According to Dr Choy, humidity onboard an aircraft is about 20 per cent lower than ground humidity. Effects of dehydration can range from dry skin, dry eyes and worsening of asthma to more serious issues like seizures, loss of consciousness and deep vein thrombosis (DVT). DVT is the development of blood clots in the deep veins of legs due to reduced in-flight mobility. At higher risk of DVT are certain groups including older adults and people with certain conditions like previous DVT and blood disorders as well as those who smoke and/or underwent a recent orthopaedic or neuro-surgery, added Dr Choy.

TIP HAVE A SAFE FLIGHT

Prevent in-flight ailments with these tips from Dr Choy from Raffles Medical.

- Guzzle plenty of water and fluids during your flight and abstain from beverages such as alcohol, coffee and tea.
- If you're prone to travel sickness, opt for seats located in the middle of the aircraft. This is the calmest area of the aircraft. Avoid alcohol and reading during your flight. Alternatively, ask your doctor for options to alleviate motion sickness.
- Reduce your risk of catching a cold or flu with regular hand washing and wear a face mask if you're seated near a sick passenger. If possible, have the affected passenger put on one too.
- Consider wearing special compression stockings to prevent clot formation in your legs. Move around often, for example, by doing stretching exercises.

5. Ahh, the sun, sea and sleep...

A study published in the *Global Environment Change* journal in 2013 found that being outdoors, near the sea and on a warm sunny afternoon boosts happiness. Most of the 22,000 people surveyed were found to be much happier outdoors in a natural environment than they were in urban environments.

While excessive sun exposure can harm the skin, the right dose can lift your spirits. It boosts the chemical serotonin in the brain, which is linked to a calmer, more positive mood. Sunlight boosts the Vitamin D supply in your body that is needed to build and maintain strong bones. Exposure to natural daylight and all that holiday activity

translates to better sleep at night. But the same mood-boosting benefits may not apply post-vacation. In the 2010 *Applied Research in Quality of Life* study, there was generally no difference between the post-trip happiness levels of vacationers and non-vacationers. Only a "very relaxed" holiday boosted vacationers' happiness after return.

Researchers hypothesised that the pile of work in the office is likely to be one post-holiday mood dampener. That is, until you start planning your next trip.

TIP DEFEND, DISCONNECT

- Excessive ultraviolet ray exposure can cause premature skin ageing, pigmentation and skin cancer. So

limit direct sun exposure, especially between 10am and 4pm, by using protective clothing and putting on a broad-brimmed hat, advised Dr Rachael Teo, specialist in dermatology and consultant at Raffles Skin & Aesthetics Centre.

“Don’t forget the sunscreen. You will need one with UVA and UVB protection with at least SPF 30 (Sun Protection Factor), and re-apply it every few hours,” she added.

One common misconception about sun-block is that the higher the SPF, the better. According to the Skin Cancer Foundation, SPF 15 blocks approximately 93 per cent of all incoming UVB rays. SPF 30 blocks 97 per cent; and SPF 50 blocks 98 per cent of UVB rays. Anything above SPF 50 will not have a significant impact on protection, added Dr Teo.

● To give yourself a real mental break, try not to bring work along on your vacation. Obviously that may not always be possible these days because of our smart phones.

Said Ms Chai: “Try to disconnect to some extent. For example, only check your email once a day and budget a fixed amount of time to respond to emails.

“Try to do this when your family is also having their own personal time so your work does

HEALTHKIT ESSENTIALS

- Plaster strips
- Sachet antiseptic solution
- Sterile cotton balls
- Paracetamol for fever/pain
- Ibuprofen/Ponstan (mefenamic acid) for fever/pain
- Maxolon for nausea and vomiting
- Piriton/Cetirizine/Telfast for cold
- Loperamide for diarrhoea
- Ultracarbon for stomach gas/wind
- Antacid for gastric discomfort
- Buscopan for abdominal cramping

A pre-packed travel kit, including an information leaflet explaining the safe use of the medication, is available at all Raffles Medical Clinics. Seek medical advice from your doctor prior to departure. Travellers with other medical conditions may also need to bring along their regular medications.

Source: Dr Raymond Choy, general practitioner at Raffles Medical at Changi Airport Terminal 3.

not intrude on the holiday activities of others.”

If travelling across the globe proves to be too stressful, why not consider a shorter trip or even a staycation in Singapore?

“Many workaholics haven’t had the time to even enjoy the many delights and attractions in Singapore!” quipped Ms Chai.