



## Dr Gill's Blog - December 2018



### Dr Gill MacLeod

Executive Director of Primary Care

I had a real Christmas experience this week!

As I was struggling up the stairs in a crowded tube station into a rainy street with a big suitcase full of gifts for my family and surrounded by stressed looking people rushing to various destinations. Then something interesting happened:

My suitcase got lighter and lighter, floated out of my hand and made its way to the top of the stairs. It really did feel like that. Had I had too much festive cheer? Nope. A complete stranger had taken the handle very gently and put the case down equally gently, smiled at me and walked away – WOW. He did it with such grace I was really impressed. I felt great, it was a really nice human interaction and that got me thinking..... giving and permitting random acts of kindness makes us feel emotionally better. We need to do more of this and focus on others not ourselves. What better time than Christmas to remind ourselves about this.

**I have always known the research that shows doing things for others actually makes YOU like THEM more.**

That takes a little thinking about at first but it is definitely true. I read about it many years ago and resolved to let people help me because allowing it actually makes everyone feel good.

Doctors love patients they have been able to help just for example. We all feel better disposed to people who have allowed us to help them. We feel better, the other person has been helped, and if the other person is able to accept help knowing we have enjoyed giving it everyone is a winner!

I also smiled a few months ago when I read a neat piece of research showing that if you apologise to someone for something you are not responsible for – such as “I am so sorry about the weather” - they are more likely to say yes if you then ask for a favour. I can promise you this one works and it is a great tip for defusing a difficult conversation before you start.

**So here is my Christmas destressor.... help someone and let someone help you if they offer and just enjoy the natural dopamine and endorphin kick this provides.**

## What will you give your liver for Christmas?



**We are always told that the liver can regenerate itself, but just how true is that?**

The Greeks believed that the gods punished Prometheus for stealing the knowledge of fire and giving it to humans by chaining him to a rock where every day his liver was pecked out by an

eagle only to grow back overnight, perpetuating his torment. Gruesome stuff, but did the ancient Greeks know something about liver regeneration?

The liver is the largest internal organ in the body sitting safely behind the rib cage and receiving all the blood from our guts. The liver is where our metabolism sits. Everything we eat and drink, including the medicines we take all flow through the liver for processing. Sugars, fats and alcohol are all dealt with by the liver. So far so good. So what's the problem?

Well, the problem is that the thousands of chemical reactions that are taking place to break down alcohol and excess sugars and fats in your liver can form damaging toxins. The liver can deal with these toxins, but if there are just too many of them, for example if we drink too much, then the cells that make up your liver can be damaged and some can even die away.

This is where the regeneration comes in and new liver cells replace the ones that are lost. If the damage is too much, or if it goes on for too long, then the liver can't keep up and the dead cells are replaced by scar tissue. We call this fibrosis, and over years, fibrosis builds up and leads to cirrhosis.



**6 pints of beer**

**7 glasses of wine  
(175ml)**

**14 single shots of  
spirits (40% alcohol)**

### **So how much is too much?**

Recommended limits are that you consume no more than 14 units of alcohol or about a bottle and a half of wine a week with 3-4 alcohol-free days. Lots of people ask me about 'Dry January'. Going dry for a month can help in lots of ways. It can give your liver a rest and a chance to recover from all the food and drink we enjoyed in the run up to Christmas and New Year.

Alcohol is full of calories, so a month off can help you lose weight and give your New Year's gym resolution a bit of a boost. Avoiding alcohol can help you sleep better, wake up refreshed and feel more positive for the day ahead. But, it doesn't completely reset the clock and although liver damage can reverse if you stop drinking, it doesn't disappear after 4 weeks.

So even if Prometheus and the eagle is a bit far-fetched, the ancient Greeks were clearly right to be fascinated with the liver. If you are worried about your liver, there are some simple tests we can

do to let you know if there has been any damage. Blood tests are helpful but can be normal even if the liver is scarred. New technology such as the Fibroscan can give you an indication in a few minutes if there is any liver damage with a painless scan. Find out more at [liverlondon.org](http://liverlondon.org).

*Content kindly provided by Professor Dr William Alazawi (MA,MB BChir PhD MRCP)*



**Dr William Alazawi**

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## Dear Doctor

Dear Doctor,

**I don't like short dark days and I find prolonged exposure to my relatives challenging; they always buy me socks. I have a lot of socks. I don't like turkey; it gives me indigestion, chocolate gives me a sugar rush and alcohol makes me sneeze. I get wheezy and itchy eyes near conifer needles and wrapping paper gives me a skin rash. Last year I pricked my finger on holly and it became infected. The year before, I got cold sores from a kiss under the mistletoe. Please can you help me get through December?**

Dear Reader Oh Deer! 'Snow wonder you are not looking forward to the next few weeks.

-Yes, many people struggle with the short dark days and it certainly sounds as though you are a good candidate to benefit from a SAD lamp. We all love a bargain and a cheering fact is that lamps which are properly certified as medical devices are VAT exempt for Seasonal Affective Disorder sufferers. The other good news is that from Dec 21st the days will once again be getting longer....

-Family dynamics are a well-recognized stressor at this time of year but you might consider breaking up the time by volunteering to work with the homeless instead. There are a number of really excellent organisations such as Crisis at Christmas who would be very happy to have your help. (They might also find grateful recipients for your excess sock collection.)

-Turkey certainly isn't everyone's cup of tea. Goose is a traditional alternative although it is fatter and more calorific. Turkey has slightly more vitamin B3, but both contain similar amounts of vitamin B6, iron and zinc. There are of course now several leaner meat substitutes for vegans and vegetarians. As to the indigestion it is important to eat slowly and to stop eating when you're full !



-Chocolate is notorious for its 'sugar rush' effect. Generally the lower GI foods are a better alternative but if you want something sweet I would encourage you in the direction of Christmas pudding; the fruit will add to your '5 a day'. However in your particular case I would have concerns about you opting for a truly traditional pudding with silver coins baked into the mix. I fear it might not go that well for you.

-Sneezing after drinking alcohol is interesting and not that uncommon. It could either be due to an intolerance or another phenomenon known as gustatory rhinitis. Rhinitis is inflammation of the nasal lining leading to stuffiness and sneezing. Gustatory rhinitis is thought to be a type of non-allergic rhinitis associated with certain foods and or alcohol. Over the counter decongestants will often contain matters but you would need to take one about half an hour before drinking to allow time for it to be effective. You may also be interested to know that there is an identifiable genetic disorder which results in sneezing after heavy meals.

- You seem to have a conifer allergy – for which I would advise an antihistamine such as loratadine (no prescription needed) and topical anti-allergy eye drops containing sodium cromoglicate. Of course another possibility is to get a tinsel rather than 'proper' tree but please be careful near it. Any early suggestion of tinselitis and you should gargle with salt water.

- You sound like quite a sensitive individual as it would appear that you also have contact dermatitis and I suspect that it is the formaldehyde that is sometimes used in wrapping paper that you are reacting to. Formaldehyde has many commercial uses and so you may well have also noticed rashes to other everyday products such as antiperspirants and embalming fluid. Patch testing will help confirm the diagnosis and if this is the issue avoidance is probably the best policy. Someone else will need to wrap (and unwrap) gifts for you.



-You are right holly is dangerous. I would advise against eating it, drinking it or decking with it.

-Aciclovir cream is available over the counter for your cold sores and if recurrent or severe an oral course can be prescribed. The causative herpes simplex virus is easily transmissible (as sadly you know) so if active sores, sorry no mistletoe moments for you this year (unless of course with the person who gave them to you in 2016).

Overall it appears you have quite a severe case of Christmastitis but help is at hand with a recently opened specialist clinic. Chimneys Santaorium offers a number of complementary therapists for delivery of compliments of the season. There is an onsite Claustrophobia specialist, a cardiologist to bring you cards and a stroke consultant to stroke you.

The roomatologist will assist you if there isn't any at the inn and ensure that you are at least kept in a stable condition. There is a radio-therapist to help ensure your seasonal music requests all get on air and in order to avoid further sock saturation I would suggest you spend quality time with the ENT (Exciting New Tie ) specialist.

To help you truly relax the oncologist has been switched to an offcologist. The end-ocrinologist will help you complete the old year in style and the newrologist will help ease you into the next while the fizziotherapist will add the bubbles to your champagne. Uponsettia forth into the New Year you will chestnut credit how much more you will believe in yourself, Santa.

Have a good one and all the best for a Happy 'elfy New Year !

*This month's Doctor's Corner was kindly provided by Dr Karen Lindall*



**Karen Lindall**

HCA UK GP

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## Do you have a health related question?



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