



Yuletide: the perfect excuse to embrace the feel-good benefits of singing

Why Christmas is so good for you

From belting out carols to getting your mingle on at parties, there are lots of surprising ways the silly season can help your health. Here's how...

Crooning = happiness

We'll take any opportunity to (tunelessly) give a rendition of Wham!'s *Last Christmas*, but who knew it had more benefits than merely allowing us to indulge our pop-star fantasies?

Yes, science has found that singing can help regulate our breathing and give our lungs a workout. It gets a gold star in the wellbeing stakes, too. Professor Graham Welch, chair of music education at University College London's Institute of Education, explains: 'Singing in

a group has been proven to reduce stress and release the feel-good hormone oxytocin, which helps us bond with other people.'

Helen Astrid, owner of The Helen Astrid Singing Academy, agrees: 'Singing sends endorphins rushing around the body – and even the business world recognises that, with companies looking for alternative ways to bring staff together by doing something fun, stress-busting and stimulating.' We're so keen to start an office choir now!

Giving back gives to you

This is the time of year when we're more inclined to give back (it's a fact: UK charity donations increase by 5% in December). But donating not only helps others – it also gives us a bit of a rush. The men in white coats have even done MRI scans on people's brains to discover how giving makes us feel... and their tests revealed that a donation to charity hits us right in the ventral striatum – that's the pleasure and reward centre of the brain, if you didn't know! →

An easy way to donate? Boxed charity Christmas cards are available in selected Boots stores, with a 5% donation going to Macmillan Cancer Support* and a 5% donation going to BBC Children in Need† (see page 31). Plus, you can buy a Christmas badge – so cute on your lapel – with the suggested £2 donation going to Macmillan. (And remember, giving back isn't just for Christmas...)

Elf improves your health

In fact, this applies to anything that makes you howl with laughter. Why? Humour can help reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which in turn helps our ability to memorise and to learn. As well as *Elf*, our favourite Christmas funnies include *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* and *Home Alone*. So don't forget to stock up on humorous DVDs for a happy holiday.

'Strolling around the shops can be great exercise (and much more fun than 30 minutes on a treadmill)'

Mingle for a longer life!

Being a social butterfly has a far greater effect than just making you feel like Miss Congeniality. That pre-Christmas coffee with a friend, or the eggnog with the next-door neighbours, can have a powerful effect on your state of mind – researchers have found that being sociable may help alleviate the symptoms of depression. Plus, being a top mingler when you're older may help ward off dementia, and reduce blood pressure and the risk of some cancers, osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis. If that's not a reason to say yes to every invite this season, we don't know what is.

Shop to boost wellbeing

No, this isn't a misprint. A Taiwanese study of people aged over 65 found that those who shopped daily lived longer than those who did not, with older men faring the best. Of course, the study's authors recognised that strolling around the shops can also be great exercise (and, to be honest, it's more fun than 30 minutes on a treadmill), plus it offers much-needed social interaction, which has benefits for our health and wellbeing, too. We'll take that as our cue to head down the high street, *pronto*.

Skating gives good 'buns'

OK, most of us won't ever pose a threat to skating stars Torvill and Dean. But even if you're about as likely to skate their *Boléro* as Taylor Swift is to turn thrash metal, just getting out there on the ice gives good butt (among other things)! 'Ice-skating provides a great cardio workout, strengthens your quads and it's great for your glutes [bottom muscles],' says Dr Eleanor Tillett, consultant in sport and exercise medicine and medical adviser to the National Ice Skating Association. 'And if you're a beginner, you'll use even more energy just trying to balance and get around.'

Her top tips for ice-rink newbies? 'When you first step on the ice, don't cling to the barrier. Make like a penguin and march forward in small steps. This will help you get used to the slippery surface.' As a beginner, let's face it, you probably *will* fall over, but Eleanor also has advice

for minimising the damage: 'Lean slightly forward as you're skating – you'll be less likely to slip, but if you do, you can use your knees to break the fall. Remember to wear gloves and be prepared for a few bruises!' (Extra handy hint: keep Boots Pharmaceuticals Bruise Relief Arnica Cream, £4.39/439 points, 30g, in your rucksack for emergency first aid.)

Board games boost brains

Who knew that whipping out a Monopoly/ Trivial Pursuit/Scrabble set after Christmas lunch has a more important purpose than keeping us awake as we nurse our food babies? In fact, research has found that playing board games may help lower a person's risk of dementia and depression as they get older. Result!

So, next time you're locked in a Scrabble-induced 'discussion' with your teenager over whether 'YOLO' is actually a word, just think how much it's helping your brain...



Gift-giving can be good for us (you can find festive wrapping paper in store and online!)



Skate your way to a tighter tush