Can you stomach the festivities?

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(Medical Xpress) -- Christmas and the New Year is the time of over-indulgence - and long may it continue. But is the season of festive feasting and making merry taking its toll on your body?

Researchers at the Department of Food and Nutritional Science at the University of Reading study the effects of food on the body both with human trials and in the laboratory, using the Department's world-class research facilities.

The Department's facilities include the UK's largest pilot food processing plant - a mini food factory - a clinical nutrition unit, and labs, including a complete recreation of a human gut.

Professor Glenn Gibson, Professor of Food Microbial Sciences and an

expert on the gut bacteriology of human health and disease, had the following advice to maintain a sense of wellbeing during the party season.

1. Try to eat more fruit and veg

If you eat a lot of meat then bacteria in the gut can break down the protein to produce noxious substances such as ammonia, amines and phenols, toxic substances which can cause inflammation in the gut.

"Try to increase your fibre intake by eating more fruits and vegetables," said Professor Gibson. "Fibre is also degraded by the bacteria but produces positive components as result. These can help offset the effects of a lot of protein."

Among the positive components created from fibre are energy for your muscles, fuel for gut cells, and appetite suppressors created by the liver.

2. Beware of food poisoning

With the shelves in your fridge groaning under the weight of all those tasty treats, it can be tempting to ignore normal rules on food safety. But be careful: it's all too easy to spread bugs that cause stomach upsets - a sure-fire way of ruining your Christmas and New Year.

To avoid food poisoning, don't put raw meat above trifles or cakes in the fridge, use clean cutlery for carving and eating, throw food out that is beyond its use-by date, and do not use tea towels for more than one day.

"Bacteria can double every 20 minutes, given the correct conditions," Professor Gibson said.

"All raw meat contains harmful bacteria, such as campylobacter in chicken and E. coli in beef, and therefore needs cooking properly. It only takes 10 cells of the bacteria shigella to give someone food poisoning."

3. Try a probiotic

A probiotic and/or prebiotic supplement in your diet will help the ‘good' bacteria in the gut do their jobs properly by aiding digestion, and help reduce the effects of some of the ‘bad' bacteria that can cause an upset stomach.

Professor Gibson and his colleagues at the University of Reading have conducted research showing the positive effects of probiotic and prebiotic supplements. He is currently researching their effects on the performance of elite athletes.

4. Get some exercise

Many people swear by the benefits of the post-Christmas meal stroll to ‘help their dinner go down', and the Boxing Day football match or New Year's Day walk in the country are well-established traditions. There is evidence that exercise after eating can aid a feeling of wellbeing

But a little bit of exercise has a greater beneficial effect than simply aiding digestion. "Exercise stokes up your immune response, helping to fight off winter bugs such as coughs, colds, or winter vomiting virus - essential if you want to have a happy holiday."

5. Drink at least as much water as alcohol

This will prevent dehydration and make the next morning more bearable.

A well-known way to mitigate your hangovers - so what's the science behind that? Professor Gibson's mischievous response suggests that even leading research scientists know how to let their hair down.

"No idea. Self testing. All in the name of research, of course. Multiple replication is obviously crucial."

Provided by University of Reading

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