

9 December, 2014

Surviving the holiday season

For most people, the holiday season is a time to kick back, relax and enjoy a well-earned break with family and friends. Not so for clinicians working in the St George and Sutherland Hospital Emergency Departments where an increase in presentations can be up by 40 per cent during the festive season.

According to Dr Peter Grant, Senior Staff Specialist, Emergency Department, St George Hospital, patients attend the Emergency Department over the festive season for a wide variety of reasons.

“We treat children who have suffered injuries due to accidents involving toys, skateboards, and bikes, and elderly patients suffering falls or other mishaps in the unfamiliar environment of relatives’ homes,” Dr Grant said.

“An increase in mental health presentations may also occur, as Christmas can be a lonely time for the socially isolated.

“Patients transported by road ambulance or airlifted to Hospital with major trauma also peaks over the Christmas and New Year period, with one quarter of cases involving patients aged from 16 to 24, and more common in males.”

Dr Andrew Finckh, Director of Emergency Department, Sutherland Hospital, said summer heatwave conditions can lead to heat-related presentations, particularly for elderly patients or those with chronic medical conditions.

“Holidays bring opportunities to eat and drink, but it’s important to remember that moderation and simple hygiene measures can help avoid the pitfalls of over-indulgence,” Dr Finckh said.

“Every year as the temperature rises, so does the number of cases of infectious gastroenteritis. This is easily spread through contact with contaminated food or surfaces or an infected person. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, fever, abdominal pain, headache and muscle aches.

The public are encouraged to be proactive in avoiding Emergency Department attendance over the Christmas and New Year period by:

- Taking additional care on the roads and while participating in outdoor recreational activities.
- Ensuring that Christmas gifts such as bikes and skateboards are accompanied with protective equipment such as helmets and knee pads and are used under appropriate supervision.

South Eastern Sydney Local Health District
Media contact: Maxine Brennan 02 9113 2601 or 0413 028 776

- Keeping a close eye on elderly relatives with impaired mobility in unfamiliar surroundings, and ensuring that they have an adequate supply of prescription medications to last the holiday period.
- Making regular checks on the well-being of the socially isolated.
- Taking precautions on very hot days such as maintaining hydration, minimising physical activity, wearing light clothing and avoiding alcohol. Staying indoors between 11am and 5pm, ideally in an air-conditioned environment, is also advised.
- Supervising and keeping a watchful eye on children, particularly around water.
- Keeping small children and people with lung and heart problems indoors when air quality is poor, or limiting the time spent exercising outside to periods when the air clears.
- Washing hands with soap and water before eating or preparing food, after using the toilet and after changing nappies.
- Not leaving food out in the heat and keeping leftovers for a few days.
- Moderating alcohol consumption, particularly on New Year's Eve.

Patients with non-urgent conditions should attend a 24-hour GP clinic or contact the 24-hour free hotline *Healthdirect* Australia on 1800 022 222, which is manned by a registered nurse.

Patients who are experiencing heart and breathing problems or who need urgent medical attention should always attend their Emergency Department or contact Triple 0.

South Eastern Sydney Local Health District

Media contact: Maxine Brennan 02 9113 2601 or 0413 028 776

healthdirect AUSTRALIA – providing expert health advice 24 hours a day to NSW residents – Tel. 1800 022 222