

Coping with the physical consequences of the festive season

Self Care health facts column

1388
2013

11 December 2013



Coping with the physical consequences of the festive season

Queen Victoria, Sovereign of the United Kingdom and Empress of India, died just 21 days after the Federation of Australia in 1901. She had reigned for a record 63 years. The cause of death was cerebral haemorrhage – a stroke. However, during her life, Queen Victoria had a wide range of medical complaints; and complain she frequently did.

According to Jim Leavesley, in his book on the history of the medical treatment of celebrities, Queen Victoria could be a difficult patient. Her major chronic discomforting conditions were rheumatism and indigestion.

Victoria's personal physician, Dr. James Reid, suggested her gastrointestinal problems were brought on by particularly large helpings of suet pudding, of which she was apparently very fond. (The suet pudding, made from beef fat, may well have been a contributing factor to her heart and blood vessel disease as well!)

Whilst suet pudding probably won't be on the menu at very many Christmas dinners in 2013, other forms of pudding very likely will be. And during the December/January celebrations, eating and drinking to excess seem to occur all too commonly. Certainly heartburn and indigestion are frequent symptoms of the festive season.

After a rich meal our stomachs have to work harder and pump out extra acid to help digest the food and alcohol. The pain or discomfort that follows this exercise in overindulgence can also occur with stress, cigarette smoking, pregnancy and some medicines.

Apart from that uneasy, queasy feeling, often symptoms of indigestion include belching, burping and heartburn (known medically as reflux).

If heartburn is the main problem, you might get relief with liquid antacids like *Gaviscon* or *Mylanta* and a range of potent antacids in tablet form is also now available without prescription. *Somac* and *Zantac* are examples of such products. Queen Victoria's poor diet is well documented by her doctor, but whether she ever drank to excess is not certain. However, sadly many people now during the time of Victoria's great, great grand-daughter seem unable to enjoy themselves without alcohol; and lots of it.

Not surprisingly, there are a number of products promoted as being able to prevent or cure hangovers; mostly there is no evidence that they work. More likely to be effective; are the fluid and electrolyte replacement products. Because despite being liquid themselves, alcohol-containing drinks (wine, beer and so on) actually take water away from the parts of our body which need it most. Drinks containing caffeine such as coffee, tea or cola can do the same.



Photo by Stephanie Berghaeuser | sxc.hu

To help prevent morning-after headaches, alternate your alcoholic drinks with plenty of water. It can be helpful also to drink a long glass of sugar-sweetened cordial, an isotonic sports drink before bed - even better still, the specially formulated *Hydralyte* or *Gastrolyte*. It may not seem like the ideal beverage at the time, but it could prevent that really awful feeling the next day.

If that pain you feel needs a pain reliever, the products with paracetamol are probably the best bet; they're less likely than aspirin to cause stomach upset. Try a couple of *Panadol Soluble* and pray the noise of the fizz is not too loud for you!

For more advice and information tailor-made to your need to cope with the after effects of the festive season, or morning after problems at any time, ask at your pharmacy for one of the Self Care Fact Cards titled *Headache* and *Heartburn* and *Indigestion*.

They're available from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. You can call 1300 369 772 for the nearest location; or go to www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care then Find a Self Care Pharmacy.