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What Can Santa Claus Teach Us About Diet and Lifestyle?

This should be read first as if watching *V for Vendetta* and then *The Night Before Christmas*—you'll know when to transition.

Every year, there is a great debate about what type of diet we should be following for optimal health and longevity. Like the calendar itself, these diets seem to recycle year after year, decade after decade. Low-carb, Low-fat, Low-food—meaning fasting or starvation depending on who's talking about it—Low-salt, Low-this, Low-that.

The point seems to be that dietary excess is the problem at the root of chronic disease and premature mortality, but excess of what? Clearly, something we're doing is responsible for increasing our levels of heart disease, cancer, obesity, hypertension, type II diabetes mellitus, and a whole cornucopia of other illnesses. Our main limitation appears to be our inability to come to a consensus of what that excess is and what we should be eating less of—a problem only made worse by our unwillingness in the scientific community to actually measure the clinically relevant metrics in research studies linking dietary changes to health outcomes[1-6]. With heart disease, we'd rather measure isolated blood markers like cholesterol, homocysteine, fibrinogen, and C-reactive protein than, God forbid, actually look at blood flow to the heart, which can now be accurately measured[3]. We would rather measure weight and blood tests because they support what we *want* to be true, and ignore the cold, honest truth that these individual tests often don't correlate strongly with disease outcomes[7,8].

And so once again, we find ourselves in the holiday season—a season filled with cheer and nostalgia, food and treats galore, and hope for a better future in the new year. All of this reminds us of a particular person, someone who *must* be real because so many people around the world have heard of him (he even has his own *Wikipedia* page!)[9]. Of his many monikers—Chris Kringle, Papai Noel, Julenisse, Saint Nikolaus—he is perhaps best known as Santa Claus.

He's an individual that is highly relevant to our diet discussions, as he seems to eat in excess without any ill effects to his health. It's hard to know how old he is, but we've heard it exclaimed that he's more than 1600 years old and he has been sharing cheer, joy, and love his entire life[9]. Perhaps his health and longevity are the result of where he lives, or that pure North Pole water that he drinks. Perhaps it's his exercise regimen. After all, on Christmas Eve, he participates in an endurance feat that puts Ironman tournaments, P90X, and Jillian Michaels all to shame. Most would agree that this can't boil down to his diet. After all, he's overweight (although, amazingly, he can fit through the smallest of chimneys), and we've heard rumors that a similarly plump Mrs. Claus is constantly reminding him to eat. *What is she thinking?*

Apart from a diet of hot cocoa—which we're certain is made with locally sourced, antioxidant-rich dark chocolate—Santa's workshop is filled with tempting candy canes, cakes, and all sorts of goodies. Let's not forget the milk and cookies the good girls and

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boys leave out for him on Christmas Eve while, notably, leaving carrot sticks for his reindeer. But, given his ripe old age, *The Santa Claus Diet* clearly isn't causing him heart disease, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, or anything else, with the exception of obesity. Although, for a man who's 1600 years old and able to travel up and down chimneys in the blink of an eye, his obesity doesn't seem to be a real problem. How has Santa stayed immune to the health effects of obvious dietary excess?

Maybe it's his generous and cheerful attitude that's keeping him sprightly despite his round belly that shakes like a bowl full of jelly. Maybe it's the spirit of caring about others and trying to be kind, generous, and loving that's responsible for keeping his inflammation under control and his telomeres long. He must have good stress resilience to not get overwhelmed while delivering gifts to over 200 million children in one night. Maybe it's the bustling community members of Santa's workshop who support each other through the year in a shared purpose of bringing joy to children. Maybe it's the high-intensity interval sprints up and down chimneys.

I don't think anyone is proposing the rest of us follow *The Santa Claus Diet*; there's ample evidence to suggest that Santa's high-glycemic, highly refined carbohydrate and saturated fat heavy diet is actually at the root of many of the leading causes of chronic disease. But maybe during this time of year, we should take a moment to reflect on some of the wisdom of Santa and how it might relate to his longevity.

It may not be one particular thing we've added in excess to our diets or removed from our lifestyles that has led to the chronic disease epidemic we now face. Perhaps it is the combination of the world we live in, which is so very different from the world that Santa and Mrs. Claus live in at the peaceful, active, and supportive community of the North Pole. In our world, we are sedentary, we eat more calories than we burn, we eat large quantities of highly processed foods, we abuse our bodies with stress and sleep deprivation, and we are increasingly disconnected from social ties and community. We are more focused on how many friends we have on social media and how many likes we get, than how many friends we truly have. Diet is just a piece of the puzzle, and it's pretty clear from Santa's experience that diet isn't everything.

Santa is almost certainly reducing his chronic disease risk with a multitude of healthy protective behaviors, which we would be wise to learn from. Research has shown that even just feeling a sense of love and support and having a purposeful engagement in one's life can offer protection from coronary heart disease while increasing longevity[10]. We also know that higher levels of loneliness can be associated with an increased risk for coronary heart disease[11]. Simple interventions including listening to music, hugs, and deep breathing may affect risk factors associated with chronic disease,[12] all very much a part of Santa's life. Many studies have shown a relationship between poor sleep, lack of exercise, and high psychological stress on cardiometabolic diseases,[13] and I'm told that with the exception of December 24, Mr. and Mrs. Claus guarantee that they and everyone at the North Pole get the recommended amount of sleep, exercise, and good cheer.

Indeed, reflecting on the enigma of Santa's health and longevity reminds us that the development of chronic disease is multifactorial in nature,[1,4,7,8] and many health behaviors other than diet can have a beneficial effect on disease risk. Santa's rich life filled with purpose, love, support, activity, music, and affection likely contributes to his health, and there is ample evidence to support this. Consistently incorporating

these simple pleasures into our modern life could likely benefit our hearts in a multitude of measurable and immeasurable ways.

And so with the new year approaching, while our grown-up Christmas list would include a 2020 research study measuring clinically useful metrics[1-8] allowing us to take better care of ourselves and our patients, we would like to take this opportunity to wish each and every one of you in the disease reversal and prevention community, and beyond, a very happy holiday season, happy Hanukkah, merry Christmas, and a happy new year! (And in Flemish—the first author's family tongue—*Vrolijke Feestdagen, Zalig Kerstfeest en Gelukkig Nieuw Jaar*!).

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