

Tickets, passport, Night Nurse...

You're desperate for a break and what happens? You get sick. Nutritional therapist Charlotte Watts has the cure for holiday flu

Photographs Leo Acker

A couple of years ago, I was frazzled by the combination of studying and setting up a business. I'd planned a relaxing holiday in the Canary Islands but, when I got there, I was so exhausted that I slept for the first few days. I later managed to drag myself to the pool a few times, but, generally, for the rest of the holiday, I was in a zombie-like state, and even developed flu. I eventually came out of my fog just in time to board the plane home. As a nutritional therapist, I should have seen it coming. I'd been totally zapped by 'leisure sickness'.

Most of us have been struck down at some point. You work right up until the last minute, rushing to get everything done before you go away, and then it hits, usually in the form of a sniffly cold that knocks you out for the first few days of your holiday. It's so commonplace that many alpha-types are resigned to it. A client of mine, a busy working mother, says that she always makes a deal with her partner to look after their son for the first two days of their holiday, as it takes that long for her to get over the flu that inevitably floors her the second she relaxes.

It was in 2001 when Dutch psychologist Dr Ad JJM Vingerhoets observed that many people became ill, usually with colds and flu-like symptoms, when they took holidays. Even by just relaxing at weekends, the same people might experience extreme fatigue, muscle pain, headaches and even nausea. The linking factors in the three per cent who fell ill in the study were stressful

jobs, heavy workloads, a tendency to perfectionism and being generally unable to relax regularly.

So what's the cause? In the six years since Dr Vingerhoets' study, stress has overtaken back pain as the number-one reason for time off work in the UK. And it's the very nature of our modern stress loads that lies at the core of why many of us get sick when we stop and relax. Twenty-first century stress and primitive stress are poles apart. In ancient times, the 'fight or flight' response happened as a result of a real threat – be that wild animals or food shortages. At the first sign of such stress, the body

would flood the system with adrenaline to produce energy and propel our response. But modern stressors are a constant drip-feed of less tangible, long-term pressures such as tasks, deadlines and worries – with little respite.

In other words, we're designed as humans to cope with short, sharp shocks, followed by rests.

In the modern world, we use our fight-or-flight mechanism to deal with ordinary, everyday situations, so our systems are constantly in a state of crisis alert. If you're sitting at a red light getting tetchy, your glands will give you a shot of adrenaline anyway – just in case – because they can't differentiate

biologically between traffic stress and, well, a wild animal. Excess adrenaline keeps us in a constant state of alert, which, over

'Modern stress loads cause many of us to get sick when we stop and relax'



the long-term, makes it difficult for the body's natural repair systems to kick in, affecting mood, appetite, sleep and most of all, immunity.

When stress is continual and prolonged, our adrenal glands produce more of another hormone, called cortisol, which helps govern our body clock. We have an ideal daily rhythm of cortisol – high levels in the morning to help us get up and tailing off towards evening, allowing us to fall asleep. Good quality, non-stressed sleep allows the immune systems to work overnight, clearing up any bacteria and viruses from the day before and making new antibodies for the day to come. Too much cortisol means fitful, unregenerative sleep which can, in turn, dull the immune system.

If we get used to pushing our adrenal glands and living in a state of nerves and excitement, the crash might take a while, but it will come eventually. 'When we're running on overdrive, the constant flood of cortisol and adrenaline actually suppresses our immune response to keep us going,' says Jules Cattell, a nutritional therapist and co-founder of Equilibria Health. 'Holidays are often the only chance our system has to catch up and perform the vital in-house maintenance of mopping up all the underlying viruses it's been holding at bay. Being ill is part of the body's process of keeping balance – forcing us to our beds to rest and recover.'

Managing director Helena Louis-Fernand, 37, can relate to this. 'The last time I went away, I was suffering from extreme work stress and had also been dealing with moving house – it was awful. I'd deliberately picked a really relaxing holiday with yoga sessions and massages, but there wasn't one moment when I felt great. I was jittery, tense, had a permanent headache and couldn't get out of bed for two days. I felt worse when I stopped than I did before; it didn't feel like a holiday at all.'

One solution is to start winding down before the holiday (we know, it's easier said than done). If you can, gradually prepare for your break by prioritising sleep and making time to 'do nothing' (not even watching tv), even if it's just for five minutes a day. This helps convince your body that it's safe to relax, which in turn supports the immune system. Anything that releases you from a state of 'constant alert' will do the trick – reading, walking the dog, gardening, yoga, breathing meditation, long baths. Also, rather than reaching for an espresso (which also

floods your body with adrenaline), try producing energy naturally with this trick, which is great first thing in the morning or last thing at night. Lie on the floor with your legs in the air, leaning against a wall and breathe through your nose and right into your belly for five minutes. This boosts circulation to the adrenal glands.

Hypnotherapist Dr Kerry Putnam suggests the following pre-holiday stress-reduction trick: 'Put a red spot on to key objects, such as your mug, computer, fridge,' he says. 'Every time you see the spot, take a deep breath. As you exhale, relax your jaw, shoulders, chest, stomach and all the way down your body to your toes. The more you do this, the more automatic it will become.'

Leisure Sickness can also be reduced by building up your 'immune tolerance'. Not

'Holidays are often the only chance our system has to perform vital in-house maintenance'



being able to handle new environments and reactions to changes in diet on holiday can be a sign of low immune tolerance and, again, are worsened by stress. But what most people don't know is that good immune tolerance is actually governed – more than anything – by a healthy gut. That relies on healthy levels of beneficial bacteria or probiotics in the system. Taking a probiotic before and during a holiday can prepare your immune system for changes and also help ward off holiday food poisoning. (Try taking Kirkman Probio Defence, £39 for 90 capsules, available from nutricentre.com.) Additionally, support your gut flora with fermented foods, such as miso soup, live yoghurt, and sauerkraut.

Supporting the immune system can also protect you from the ravages of travel. The combination of getting yourself, two kids, a dog and a husband ready and then to that holiday destination can be a recipe for stress in itself, so we need to help our bodies as much as we can to ward off illness at the last hurdle. Most superfoods contain protective flavonoids, needed in higher levels when we are under pressure. They are found in green tea, red wine, garlic, ginger, turmeric, broccoli, citrus fruits, onions, apples, green leafy vegetables and berries, so include these in your diet – especially in the fortnight before your holiday.

My holidays have changed since that Canary Islands trip. I now try to find a little bit of 'holiday' in my life throughout the week, so it's not so much of a shock when I do stop. My trick, when I now go away, is to start packing a week in advance and leave the suitcase in full view. Working through a list and slowly making small steps towards my holiday gets me into the right frame of mind to slip into it. Leisure sickness is – thankfully – a thing of the past. ■

ARE YOU HEADING FOR LEISURE SICKNESS?

Start relaxing now – or you might be suffering by the time you unpack that kaftan. The more statements below that apply to you, the more at risk you are:

- I don't wake up feeling refreshed and need caffeine or sugar to bring me round
- I have more than two

- cups of caffeine a day
- When I'm stressed or tired, I dive straight for potatoes, crisps, cakes, biscuits and chocolate
- I never take breaks at work; I eat at my desk and sometimes forget to eat
- I usually work more than 50 hours a week
- I don't get much time to myself and I tend to

- prioritise other people's happiness
- I rarely get to bed as early as I want to
- I find it difficult to switch off from work or domestic worries
- I do lots of activities and find it difficult to relax and do nothing
- I feel guilty when I relax or go on holiday