

Be loyal to exercise habits on holidays

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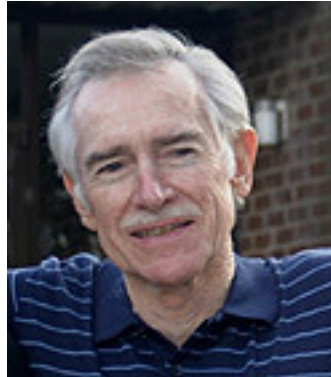
I headed out into a sunny but blustery morning Friday for a 4-miler at 7. It was a good run on another golden November day. Except for hurricanes, we Gulf Coast denizens have good weather for fall running. Turning off the Old River south levee at the baseball park at the end of 3 miles, I started working on this column. It's time to write my annual column on the hazards of weight gain from Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve.

A recent study by the National Institutes of Health suggests most Americans gain about a pound during the winter holiday season and this weight accumulates through the years and contributes to obesity in later life.

"This finding runs contrary to the popular belief that most people gain from 5 to 10 pounds between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day," said Jack A. Yanovski, M.D., and the principal researcher in the study and the head of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Volunteers in the study compared their weights in late September or early October to their weights in late February or early March; they gained just over a pound. Most of the weight

gain occurred between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. The researchers questioned the volunteers about several factors that might cause weight gain: "stress, hunger, activity level, changes in smoking habits, or number of holiday parties they attended." Only two factors seemed to influence weight gain over the holidays: "level of hunger and level of activity."



Volunteers who were much more active or much less hungry were least likely to put on the extra pounds.

"The finding that study volunteers reporting more physical activity had less holiday weight gain suggests that increasing physical activity may be an effective method for preventing weight gain during this high-risk time," Yanovski said.

That's good news for runners and those who remain loyal to and regular in their physical fitness regimens through New Year's Eve; good news, too, to those who will resolve today to begin an exercise regimen, in particular for "back-slid runners" who might set up a 10-week training schedule for toeing the starting line for the Spectacle Spectacular 5K or 10K on Saturday, Jan. 31. Setting that goal will increase your physical activity and help prevent your gaining weight.

Immediately after you read this column, go to an accurate scale and weigh yourself in your underwear. Record your

weight somewhere. If possible, compare your current weight with your weight last year.

This morning before I headed out for my run, I weighed 157. A year ago in the week of Nov. 19 to 25, my weight ranged from 155-158. On Jan. 1, 2008, I weighed 156. Twenty years ago, my weight ranged from 148-151. I was training for the Houston Marathon, and before I went out for a 14-miler on Jan. 1, 1999, I weighed 150.

The 24-Hour Fitness Web site (24hourfitness.com), suggests setting up a "holiday survival plan."

First, develop a plan to stay active. Despite travel, business, office parties, family celebrations, stick to your plan and never miss a scheduled workout.

Second, develop ways to reduce holiday stress. Exercise, for me, is the best stress reducer. "Also important are getting enough sleep, focusing on your priorities and eliminating low-priority activities if you are too busy," suggests 24-Hour Fitness.

"Third, eat defensively," the article says. "Include occasional small portions of holiday treats that you really love, but balance this by eating more prudently at other meals. Avoid munching and drinking. If you drink alcohol, keep your consumption reasonable."

Happy Thanksgiving, and good luck on keeping the weight down.

Bill Shaw's running column appears every other Monday in *The Facts*.