

By Ruth Ostrow

Christmas means never having to say sorry. That's what I like about it. You can stuff yourself silly at some Chrissie or New Year's Eve party, drink too much, flake out on the floor, misbehave appallingly and put it all down to good cheer.

And who would ever have the nerve to chastise you? The festive season is the time to get sloshed, wrecked and fabulously compromised. But here's the good news. It's medically proven that some of the wild things we do can be good for us - in small doses. My latest book, *Simple Pleasures*, quotes scientific evidence to back up my belief that pleasure keeps us ripe. It's an essential, not a luxury.

Not only do we need the release of pressure that partying can bring, but the body's feel-good chemicals released during pleasurable pursuits keep our skin elastic, our organs flushed, memories well oiled, stress levels down and hormones in balance.

When we take time to indulge ourselves, we are flooded with happiness hormones. A study at the University of Wisconsin found happy people developed 50 per cent more antibodies to the flu vaccine. Meanwhile, a deficiency of feel-good chemicals in the brain such as dopamine has been linked to Parkinson's disease, early onset of Alzheimer's and dementia.

Pleasure is the ultimate health tonic. Laughter promotes nitric oxide, which is great for improved heart and kidney function and reduced stress levels. Sex and passion unleash oxytocin, the "cuddle chemical", and nature's great stimulant phenethylamine (PEA); massage stimulates serotonin release; while ecstatic dancing floods the brain with mood-enhancing euphorics.

Meanwhile, as we see from Mireille Guiliano's bestseller *French Women Don't Get Fat*, the naughty foods we ingest can often have positive physical, as well as psychological, effects. Rich foods also contain good fats that are essential to our wellbeing. Wine contains antioxidants; red wine contains proven anti-ageing properties. The *British Medical Journal* lists the cocoa plant as one of the top nutrient sources on the planet, containing a plethora of vitamins, minerals and enzymes.

That's not to say we should overindulge too often - everything in moderation. And we do have to take the appropriate steps after festivities to repair and rebalance our bodies: hydration, exercise, detoxing and rest. But good health and wellness should be a real pleasure. So party hard - and happy New Year.

Simple Pleasures by Ruth Ostrow (Hardie Grant Books, \$19.95).

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First published in *The Weekend Australian* SAT 17 DEC 2005