

DO WEEKENDS AND HOLIDAYS MAKE YOU SICK?

For most of us holidays and time off are a time to recharge our batteries and chill out. For some people though, as soon as they stop work and try to relax they get ill.

Are you one of those people lying on a golden beach, blue waves lapping at your feet with a splitting headache? Or have you missed Christmas lunch as you are in bed with flu? People who are never sick in their working week come down with headaches, colds, sickness or fevers as soon as they leave the everyday stresses and strains behind.

Being sick is never fun, but especially over the holidays



This is known as "leisure sickness", a phrase first coined by a psychologist, Dr Ad Vingerhoets, in the Netherlands.

He said that people suffering from leisure sickness typically had a stressful job and they simply couldn't switch off, which triggered a whole host of symptoms.

His research found headache and migraine were the most common ailments for weekend sufferers, followed by fatigue and muscle pain. During holidays, they often had cold and flu-like symptoms.

When the pressure is off, people get ill

Professor of organisational psychology at the University of Lancaster, Cary Cooper, says leisure sickness usually happens to people in really pressurised jobs.

"Your immune system is stimulated by the pressure, so when you have deadlines your body knows you can't get ill. When you take a break your immune system just thinks - no more pressure. I can get sick now."

When you stop working he says: "It's like a fuse, with your brain telling your body it can switch off, so you get a cold or a headache."

Stress counsellor and lifestyle expert Liz Tucker totally agrees with the phenomenon of leisure sickness.

"It is absolutely a biological process. When you are busy at work, your body just needs to get things done so it overrides everything else."

It's when you stop that the problems start.

She says when you relax your body goes, "Oh my God [it's] time to repair and restore," so you get rundown and go down with something."

Leisure sickness is a warning

If you can identify with this, you can do something about it.

"The most important thing to realise is this is a big warning that your life is out of balance," says lifestyle expert Liz. "If you go on holiday and sleep all the time or get headaches, you need to address your day to day life. The way you are living is unhealthy."

She says you should reprioritise your life and be mindful of how you live. Spend more time on hobbies or socialising out of work.

Take up exercise, schedule in time for yourself as, in the long-term, it will benefit you at home and at work.

"If you do get leisure sickness, sometimes the brain will try to avoid relaxing at all, by keeping you stressed even when you are not at work. It will trap you into not relaxing as you don't want to feel sick."

And Professor Cooper says some people get leisure sickness at the start of their holiday, feel ill and sleep for hours. They then start to feel a bit better and it's not really until towards the end of the holiday that they start to unwind, only for it to ratchet up again as they prepare to go back to work.



Learn the art of relaxation

Instead, Liz says you should build relaxation into your everyday working life.

Grab small segments of relaxation throughout the day - what she calls "micro-relaxation".

"Do one task like make a phone call, afterwards take a few deep breaths then move on to another task like go to a meeting, have a few deep breaths after that and so on." She says you'll notice a big difference within days.

By taking small steps at relaxing in your working life, hopefully when you take a break relaxing won't come as such a big shock to your body and make you ill.

