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## In Defense of Santa

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We hope Santa's so busy he hasn't had time to read the British Medical Journal's Christmas edition. Based on St. Nick's fondness for good food, drink, and the occasional smoke, the medical establishment's lifestyle puritans have dammed Santa as a "public health pariah."

According to Nathan Grills of Australia's Monash University, Santa's excessively plump frame makes him an advertisement for everything that the public health establishment is against – from overeating, drinking, and refusing to walk (all that travel by sleigh), to the odd smoke, to driving after drinking.

As Grills told Reuters, "There is a potential for someone who is as widely recognised around the world as Santa to influence people, especially children, and to show that it's okay to drink, okay to be obese."

Grills' case against Santa is that he's used by advertisers to promote unhealthy products to children and his weight and drinking (all those glasses of brandy that are left out for him by the fireplace) encourage obesity and excess drinking. This is simply, but dangerously, the Christmas version of the endlessly repeated public health 'truth' about the dangers of advertising, eating, and drinking.

The good news is that none of it is any truer this holiday season than any other time of year.

There's little evidence that advertising using Santa or indeed any other advertising, however cleverly designed, has much effect in terms of getting children or young people to eat so-called 'bad' foods or in fact to make them fat.

Despite the public health establishment's best efforts, massive reviews of the scientific evidence about the link between children's eating preferences and food advertising – by the Institute of Medicine and in the UK by the regulator, OFCOM – have failed to show that food advertising either changes children's diets or makes them fat. Indeed, at the same time as children have supposedly been getting fatter, food advertising budgets have been getting much thinner.

Furthermore, there is considerable evidence that Santa's longevity is directly linked to his plumpness. In a massive study of weight and mortality, Katherine Flegal from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the longest lived were not the thin but rather those who were overweight, a finding confirmed in many other studies.

Increases in overweight and obesity have been paralleled by falls in mortality from coronary heart disease and stroke. And life expectancy continues to increase, despite the supposed massive increase in obesity.

Plump children should also take heart from Santa's example. The Thousand Families Study has researched 1,000 British families since 1954. Researchers there have found little connection between overweight children and adult obesity. In the study, four out of five obese people became obese as adults, not as children.

Since other studies have also found that most overweight children don't turn out to be fat adults, it shouldn't be surprising that a rigorous study published in 2005 in the scientific journal *Circulation*, found that elevated body mass index levels in children don't translate into increased risk for stroke and heart attack in later life.

But, will Santa's preference for an occasional smoke finish him off before he's delivered all of his presents? There's little chance of that happening. As depressing as it is for those of us who don't smoke, the fact is those who only smoke 3-4 cigarettes a day have about the same lung cancer risk as nonsmokers.

Finally, what about the dangers of Santa's tipping? Here, again, public health advice is consistently wrong in, first, playing down the link between drinking and longevity and, second, exaggerating the risks between drinking and diseases such as cancer.

There is massive evidence, for instance, that moderate drinkers, like good St Nick, in fact live longer than teetotalers. Moreover, the recent Million Women Study in the UK, which looked at the link between drinking and cancer, found that nondrinking women had a higher incidence of cancer than those women who had one drink a day.

So, forget the public health Grinches seeking to steal Christmas with their ridiculous anti-Santa mantra. Instead, raise a full glass, and a hefty plate of turkey, to the happy, life-loving, and very long-lived Man in Red. Merry Christmas!

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