Q I've heard a lot lately about sea buckthorn. What is it, and what are the benefits of taking it?

A Susan McLoughlin: Sea buckthorn (Hippophae rhamnoides L.) is certainly well named, for it is indeed a very thorny shrub that grows up to 4 metres tall. While the nourishing and healing qualities of sea buckthorn berries are new to the West, they have been well known in the East for hundreds of years.

If you are wondering where to start with sea buckthorn, the answer is your skin. Sea buckthorn provides a lavish feast of nutrients required for healthy, luminous skin. This superfruit contains high values of omega-3, -6, -7, and -9. Add in flavonoids, vitamin E, carotenoids, phytosterols, phospholipids, and many more; and you start to appreciate why sea buckthorn is so good for the skin, our body’s largest organ.

The bioactive compounds in sea buckthorn nutritional capsules, tea, and juice are the same bioactive compounds available in sea buckthorn body care products. The skin’s response to this kind of care is evident in softer, firmer, and more evenly toned skin. The carotenoid-rich sea buckthorn oils also show promise in protection and reduced recovery time from overexposure to UV rays.

Preparations from the fruit, seeds, leaves, and bark of sea buckthorn have demonstrated great promise in the treatment of the mucous membranes, including ulcers and gastrointestinal disorders, as well as vaginal problems. Additional studies have shown that sea buckthorn oils and juices have a positive effect on the cardiovascular system and have a cholesterol-lowering effect.

Compounds in sea buckthorn’s bark and leaves are anticarcinogenic and antitumorigenic, and new research suggests that its leaves may be effective in preventing liver damage.
Q: Some of my family members double-dip when we have finger food. I've told them it's unhealthy, but they say I'm being silly. What are your thoughts?

A: Karla Heintz, BSc Nutr: Many share your concern about double-dipping. A recent study took a look at the realities of this habit. Professor Dawson, from Clemson University, conducted the study with nine of his students to determine the amount of germs left behind after double-dipping.

The students each took a bite of a wheat cracker and then dipped it for three seconds in a tablespoon of dip. They then repeated this three to six times. Results: the double-dips transferred 10,000 bacteria from the eater's mouth to the communal dip.

Knowing this, you can avoid these bugs by creating some fun, dip-free finger foods that will keep everyone from doing this suspicious activity altogether.

Crackers are very versatile and come in various shapes and flavours to match any occasion. Some whole wheat cracker ideas:

- tuna spread on cucumber slices
- cream cheese inside rolled smoked salmon
- bruschetta with fresh parsley

Garden vegetables served properly can win over any guest. Vegetable tricks:

- sliced cucumber with roasted red pepper hummus and feta on top
- broiled mushrooms stuffed with cream cheese, crab, and chives
- stuffed cherry tomatoes with salad dressing, parsley, seafood, or bacon

Another approach is to offer bite-sized items that usually provide a greater degree of fullness and that guests will often turn to first:

- pull-apart garlic cheese bread
- multigrain nacho platter with all the veggies, cheese, and salsa already melted on
- crab cakes
- whole wheat sliced mushroom and spinach pizza

Here's an idea that will make you stand out: roll grilled chicken (already seasoned), cucumber sticks, and chives in tortilla shells. Then slice them diagonally, giving a sushi-like appearance. A fun toothpick can hold them in place and soy sauce can be drizzled on top.

Snack away! >

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I love Christmas and the holidays, but they always seem to destroy the hard work I've done all year in keeping my weight down. I find party foods so tempting; is there a way I can enjoy myself and avoid overeating?

Dr. Joey Shulman, DC: 'Tis the season for irresistible treats such as shortbread cookies, baked brie, and delicious eggnog. Even with all these goodies served at your office parties and family dinners, specific weight-loss tips can help you to sail through the holidays without adding extra pounds.

One area of indulgence that tends to skyrocket during the holidays is alcohol consumption. Unfortunately, research shows that alcohol can cause fat metabolism to decrease by as much as 73 percent.

While I'm not suggesting you avoid alcohol altogether, consider having one or two glasses of water between each glass of alcohol. The worst libation options are eggnog (357 calories for 8 oz/250 ml), sweet dessert wine (344 calories for 5 oz/150 ml), and vodka coolers (280 calories for 12 oz/355 ml). Smarter alcohol choices are red or white wine (105 calories for 5 oz/150ml) and light beer (105 calories for 12 oz/355 ml).

Other helpful tips to avoid holiday weight gain include:

**Keeping up with your exercise routine**
Remember, if you burn the calories you consume, your weight should stay the same.

**Planning your indulgences wisely**
Everyone gives into temptation over the holidays, but the key is to plan for it. If you know you really must have a piece of your favourite aunt's home-baked apple pie—go for it and enjoy.

**Having a snack before your party**
Do not go to your party hungry! Make sure to have a protein-filled snack such as yogourt, an egg, or a small piece of chicken prior to your soirée!

Remember, the holiday season does not have to be a one-way ticket to weight gain. Simply implement the steps above and the scale will be your friend!