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By Patrick Hruby

Go ahead, America: pop open another brew. Or three. Drown your chips in cheesy sludge. Slouch on the couch, turn on the tube and immerse yourself in football's Longest Day, blithely disregarding the terrible truth.

Watching the Super Bowl can kill you.

Really.

Like, dead.

And no, I'm not just talking about that Pittsburgh fan who suffered a heart attack when Jerome Bettis fumbled against Indianapolis a few weeks back.

Perhaps you think I'm paranoid. Maybe, just maybe, you think I'm a hypochondriac. Fair enough. Don't listen to me. Listen to a doctor, Jeff Kalina. As the director for emergency services at Houston's Methodist Hospital, Kalina chaired the city's disaster preparedness committee for the 2004 Super Bowl.

More to the point, he worked the E.R. on game day.



"I saw a guy with several broken teeth," Kalina recalls. "He was opening beer bottles with them. He didn't do so well. Quite frankly, we just dread the hours after the game."

With good reason. Across the nation on Super Bowl Sunday, traffic accidents spike. Domestic violence goes up. People eat themselves sick, drink until their bladders are too full to urinate (trust us: *more* painful than it sounds), gag and choke on aluminum beer can tabs.

Yep. Beer can tabs.

"I've seen it," Kalina says. "What happens is that people drop them into their beer, then forget. Or you see sick people double-dip their chips, then you get a house full of people puking their guts up.

"When people go from party to party, it makes it difficult to pick out which house they got sick at. Whose French onion dip got 'em?"

The dip will get you. The drinking will get you. The *day* will get you. Never mind the halftime show: From sunrise to signoff, Super Sunday is a series of accidents waiting to happen, starting with:

Excessive flatulence

Packed with fat, sodium, sugar and preservatives, Super Bowl staples like potato chips and buffalo wings aren't just bad for you. They're bad for how you *smell*.

Combine chocolate cake and bean dip? Microwave tacos and pepperoni pizza? Guacamole and Big Ben's Beef Jerky, the official meatlike snack of Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger?

The result is something less than Chanel No. 9.

"The gluttonous marathon that is Super Bowl Sunday is tantamount to putting a 100-pound weight on a 10-pound hook when it comes to your gastrointestinal tract," says Bill Downs, a Philadelphia nutritionist and author of trafon.org, a self-proclaimed "fart blog." "We're talking big-time farting."

Big-time heartburn, too. Plus bloating and indigestion. And all from the same source. According to Downs, some foods quickly break down in the body, fueling the "excessive fermentation" that produces gas. It even *sounds* stinky.

Meanwhile, tough-to-digest foods such as cheese pass from the stomach to the intestines, where bacteria go to work with funky effect.

"The fats go rancid; the proteins putrefy," he says. "That's why when you pass gas, there's a signature aroma going with it."



Weight gain

Super Bowl XL? More like XXXL. If the flurry of national obesity studies are true, we have become -- in the immortal words of Gunnery Sgt. Hartman in "Full Metal Jacket" -- a nation of disgusting fatbodies, our sagging waistlines ever-swelling.

Needless to say, the big game isn't helping:

- According to the Calorie Control Council, a trade group for the low-fat food industry, the average American eats 1,200 calories worth of Super Sunday snacks, enough to fuel *two hours* of running laps around a football field.
- Potato chips alone account for a nationwide consumption of 1.8 billion fat grams -- roughly equivalent to 4 million pounds of human blubber, or about 13,000 300-pound NFL linemen.
- According to the Hilton Head Health Institute, a South Carolina weight loss clinic, two heaping handfuls of peanuts -- *peanuts!* -- can contain up to 680 calories, 20 more than four buffalo wings and just 40 fewer than two slices of meat-topped pizza.

- A half-dozen cheesesticks add up to 1,140 calories, nearly half a normal person's recommended daily caloric requirement.

The good news? A single beer equals only about 110 calories. The bad news? The liver converts excess alcohol into fatty lipids, which are then stored around your waist.

"Not for nothing do they call it a beer gut," says Stefan Aschan, president of the New York-based fitness and lifestyle coaching company Strength 123. "I'm going to be very frank: The Super Bowl is dangerous for your sex life. Women don't want to see that. We're talking about performance inside and outside the bedroom."

Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum agrees, albeit for different reasons. An expert on pain and fatigue treatment, he says soda is worse for you than beer.

"You get one spoon of sugar for one ounce of soda," says Teitelbaum, author of "Pain Free 1-2-3." "Have a 64-ounce Big Gulp? That's going to drive your triglycerides sky-high, which blocks up the pipes and can cause heart disease. And also erectile dysfunction."

Teitelbaum laughs.

"You know those Super Bowl ads? All roads really do lead to Viagra."

Back pain

A man's home is his castle, his sofa a throne. (His bathroom? A Fortress of Solitude). Soft, comfy and strategically placed in front of the television, couches are the perfect spot for a king in repose and/or eating a microwave dinner.

Yet on Super Sunday, uneasy lies the crown.

ESPN's "NFL Countdown" begins at 11 a.m. ET. The Super Bowl broadcast typically ends around 11 p.m. Between ESPN and ABC, that's 12 hours of uninterrupted Super Bowl programming.

The problem? Sitting for a long period of time can result in shortened hip muscles, reduced blood flow to the joints and lower back pain.

"Show me a person with a little back pain, and I'll show you someone who sits a lot," says Dr. John Kelly, vice chairman of the Orthopedics Department at the Temple University School of Medicine. "I see it in people who work in office, in truck drivers. It just loads the heck out of your disks."

Wrist pain

Last week, the American Society of Hand Therapists -- and yes, the organization actually exists -- issued a consumer alert regarding BlackBerries, iPods and other handheld

The Other Football Can Kill You, Too

According to a Scottish study, the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary treated 151 patients for soccer-related problems during the 1998 World Cup. Among the ailments:

- A fan who suffered a severe asthma attack after Morocco took a 3-0 lead against Scotland.
- A fan who needed treatment for self-inflicted deafness after yelling at his television.
- Eight fans who suffered chest pains, two who suffered hyperventilation, one with palpitations and three with alcohol-related seizures.

Source: BBC



electronic gizmos:

Handheld electronics may require prolonged grips, repetitive motion on small buttons and awkward wrist movements. This combination can lead to hand, wrist and arm ailments such as Carpal Tunnel Syndrome and tendonitis.

Hmmm. Prolonged grips. Repetitive motion. Small buttons. Awkward wrist movements.

Sound familiar?

"I guess you could say that a remote control is along the same lines," says Christine Muhleman, president of the ASHT. "Anything you're doing for a long period of time with very fine motions, repetitive, sitting in poor postures while you're doing it, can contribute to hand and wrist pain.

"I hope there isn't anyone that uses a remote control as much as somebody uses, say, a typewriter."

Of course not. What kind of event would keep people in front of the television for an entire *day*?

Pulmonary embolism

Another thing about sitting: Do it too much, for too long, and blood clots can form in the leg muscles -- particularly if you're overweight (like, say, from noshing on the sorts of foods common to Super Sunday spreads) or suffering from heart disease (more on that in a bit).

Get up for another beer? The clot breaks off.

"Then it goes to your lungs and kills you," Kelly says. "Boom. Just like that. That's a bad way to go."

One minute you're watching Mick Jagger shimmy his sexagenarian hips, the next you're dead on the floor halfway to the bathroom. And the third quarter still hasn't gotten under way.

Come to think of it, that *is* a bad way to go.

Atonic bladder

Speaking of bad ways to go: According to Kalina, when the bladder stretches out to the point where it loses its muscle tone -- essentially, when it's overfilled with urine -- normal urination becomes impossible. You need a doctor. And a catheter.

In the interest of good taste, we'll let you imagine the rest.

"It's pretty brutal," Kalina admits.

Now consider some numbers. According to AC Nielsen, beer sales rise by \$11.8 million during Super Bowl week. Hallmark's Party Express claims the average Super Sunday party hosts 18 people. Meanwhile, we're pretty sure the average American household does *not* contain 18 bathrooms.

Does Domestic Violence Really Go Up During The Super Bowl?

Yes. An Indiana University study of 14 NFL cities found that there were an average of 244 additional cases of domestic violence on Super Sunday. However, the game itself might not make a difference, as researchers noticed a similar spike on every major holiday save Valentine's Day.

Oddly enough, the study also found an inverse relationship between domestic violence and the point spread -- that is, the more a team was expected to lose, the greater the number of domestic violence dispatches in that team's home city on game day.

Perhaps being the underdog isn't such a good thing.

Do the math. Got cringe?

"I saw [atonic bladders] happen during the Super Bowl," Kalina says. "I saw it during Mardi Gras when I was in college. Wherever people are drinking a lot and are in large groups and holding it as much as they can. Beer contributes to the problem. It's painful."

The ongoing corruption of our youth

Clichéd but true: Super Bowl advertising has become nearly as big as the game itself. Year after year, Madison Avenue lets loose the talking frogs of war -- making ads bigger, louder and forever more expensive, the better to win undying brand loyalty.

Fortunately for the nation's collective pocketbook, their efforts are largely for naught. (Sorry, Pets.com).

"The majority of people advertising during the Super Bowl probably waste their money," says BJ Bueno, a marketing consultant and co-author of "The Power of Cult Branding." "Look at the audience: They're drunk, having fun and you're just an advertiser. Isn't that a formula for 'Please forget me?'"

Stayin' Alive

Want to stay healthy on Super Sunday? Dr. Kathleen Hall, a stress management expert, offers the following advice:

- Spend 3-5 minutes meditating before the game. Come up with a short mantra -- *Steelers cover the spread, Steelers cover the spread* -- that fosters a sense of peace. Make sure to catch the halftime show.

"Listening to music releases chemicals in your body that will calm you," Hall says. "And if you start singing along with the Rolling Stones, you'll get an immune boost."

- Laugh at the commercials. Don't sweat the actual game. "Laughing increases the diameter of your arteries by 22 percent," Hall says. "But when you're chronically stressed, it reduces the diameter by a third."

- Get some exercise. Put a 3- to 5-pound ankle weight around each can of beer you drink, cozy-style. Place your beer cooler on the back porch so that you have to walk back and forth between refills.

According to Dr. Charles Emerman, chairman of the emergency medicine department at Ohio's Cleveland Clinic, however, the latter might not be a good idea.

"In the E.R., we see people getting into fights over who won, people getting into car accidents on their way home from the sports bar," he says. "But most commonly, it's people just tripping and falling. They're usually not sobered up by the time we see

"Think of those guys like E-Trade -- who's thinking about finances during the Super Bowl? Not even the guy who loves trading is focusing on that."

them."

Distressingly, the same cannot be said of our children (you know, the people who can be ordered to change the channel so you don't hurt your wrist). If kids really are the future, then the Super Bowl puts tomorrow at risk. Consider:

- According to a study published in the journal *Pediatrics*, every hour of television watched per day before age 3 increases a child's chances of later being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder by 10 percent.
- Researchers believe that televised images can traumatize children and that kids between the ages of 2 and 7 are particularly frightened by "scary-looking things like grotesque monsters." Such as a shirtless Bettis. Or pictures of Roethlisberger with his playoff beard, partying in what appears to be the electrical room of a 1950s fallout shelter.
- Other studies show that teens who watch lots of sexual content on TV are more likely to initiate intercourse or participate in other sexual activities earlier than peers who don't watch the same shows. Connect the dots: The Super Bowl is chock-full of ads featuring middle-aged guys throwing footballs through tires hanging from backyard trees, as well as older couples touching fingers while reclining in outdoor bathtubs overlooking sunsets.

Really, how much more explicit can it get?

Car crashes

Friends don't let friends drive drunk. Friends don't let friends watch "Joey." Friends shouldn't let friends anywhere near the road after the game.

According to a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, traffic accidents spike more than 40 percent in the hours after the Super Bowl -- an average of 1,300 more crashes, 600 more injuries and seven more deaths nationwide.

More telling? In states with the losing team, the number of crashes increases 68 percent after the game, but accidents rise only 6 percent in the state with the winning team.

Alcohol, experts say, plays a role. So do driver inattention and fatigue. Brendan Tobin, an ESPN.com reader and volunteer firefighter in New Jersey, tells the following story:

"Flashback to two years ago. We headed out at halftime [of the Super Bowl] to a vehicle rollover. The driver, a woman, had been taking a curve at high speed when she looked down to make sure she had the right radio station to listen to the game.

"She was racing from her house to a friend's [house], with a 25-inch TV in the back of her SUV. Her friends had called to say their TV had broken, so she hustled hers TV out of her house, put it in her car and raced over. She never made it.

"The truck was wrecked, so was her TV, her dog had run off, she got several tickets and she ended up in the hospital. As she was being carted away, she was on her cell phone, telling her friends she wouldn't get there. And we missed the second half due to crash scene cleanup."

Heart attacks

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association recently warned that extended cheering can result in hoarseness, irritation of the vocal cords and other disorders. However, they said nothing about the Super Bowl and heart attacks.

This is a gross oversight.

A Dutch study found that the number of fatal heart attacks and strokes suffered by Dutchmen jumped 50 percent on the day Holland lost to France in the 1996 European soccer championships. A similar British study reports that England's penalty-kick loss to Argentina in the 1998 World Cup resulted in a 25 percent increase in heart attack admissions to English hospitals -- a total of 55 more heart attacks than average.

Why the rash of troubled tickers? Dr. Matt DeVane, a California cardiologist, offers two explanations:

- Fatty meals can break down the endothelium, the protective inner lining of the arteries. This lets in more bad cholesterol and ultimately can trigger spasms, the first event in a heart attack or stroke.

Add the adrenaline rush of an exciting play -- or of Janet Jackson's breakaway bustier -- and the resulting spike in heart rate and blood pressure can prove dangerous.

"It can cause problems," says DeVane, author of "Heart Smart: A Five-Step Plan for Detecting and Preventing and Even Reversing Heart Disease." "For a 50-year-old guy who doesn't know he has heart problems, then he's sitting on a couch eating a fatty meal having a smoke, it's like all of the sudden doing a sprint.

- When people who don't usually drink decide to get loaded -- think a teetotaling college student after final exams -- they can suffer what doctors call "Holiday Heart Syndrome."

"Your heart can go out of rhythm," DeVane says. "The upper chamber of the heart starts beating very fast and irregular. You feel short of breath, like you're running a race. A younger person can tolerate it, but if you're older and you already have heart problems, it can make you pretty sick."

Ironically, someone feeling ill might be less likely to seek immediate help during a big event. For one, the warning signs of a heart attack -- dizziness, chest pain, labored breathing, nausea -- are similar to the symptoms of overeating; in addition, doctors say sick people tend to "tough it out" during major sporting events.

A study of Boston hospitals found that emergency room visits dropped 15 percent on game nights during the Red Sox's 2004 playoff run.

"We see the same things when we cover stadiums," says Dr. Emerman of the Cleveland Clinic. "People with bleeding ulcers and heart attacks, who should have gone to see their doctors two days ago.

Take The Over (Eating)

Page 2 asked Anthony Munnely, a senior analyst at the online sportsbook Sportsinteraction.com, to come up with odds for America's Super Sunday consumption. Here are the over/unders:

- Total number of barrels of beer consumed: 11 million.
- Total amount of popcorn consumed, in pounds: 3.8 million.
- Total amount of potato chips consumed, in pounds: 11 million.
- Total number of pizzas consumed: 2 million.
- Odds on wine outselling beer on Super Sunday: 5 to 1.

"Really, if you're sick, the best time to go to the emergency room is during the game. You can walk right in. We even have televisions. So don't wait. You can watch the game."

Falling objects

Airborne objects you want to see on Super Sunday:

(A.) Footballs thrown by Roethlisberger and Matt Hasselbeck;

(B.) The stadium blimp, even though the game is in a dome;

(C.) Jerramy Stevens' teeth after Joey Porter is through with him.

Airborne objects you *don't* want to see on Super Sunday:

A television set about to land on your head the way the anvil always landed on Wile E. Coyote.

"When I was back in St. Louis at the Washington School of Medicine, there was a gentleman in an apartment building who threw his television out of a second-story window," Kalina recalls. "He was so peeved about the [St. Louis] Rams losing to the [New England] Patriots."

So, did the TV hit anyone?

"Nah. I guess everyone else was still inside, just as mad."

Believe it or not, televisions are only the second-most dangerous plummeting item that can put a crimp in your Super Bowl experience. The first? Stray bullets.

Though America isn't, say, Baghdad, people here still like to party by firing guns into the air. No joke: A headline in the Jan. 2 Chicago Sun-Times proclaimed "Celebratory Gunfire At A Minimum," and the concurrent article noted that *only* 450 shots were reported fired on New Year's Eve, down from the 660 shots reported the previous year.

On the day of the 2004 Super Bowl, Kalina treated a man with a foot wound. The previous evening, the man had attended a pregame street party. On his way home, he felt something hot in his foot.

When he took off his shoe, the man noticed something odd. His sock was wet. And red.

"There was a bullet in his shoe," Kalina recalls. "It had entered in his heel and exited the bottom of his foot. The evening before that, I had been at the same event with my child. I wasn't too thrilled. I guess the Super Bowl really can kill you."

What goes up, must come down. An old adage holds that it isn't paranoia if they really are out to get you. When it comes to watching the Super Bowl, it isn't hypochondria if you're standing in a pool of blood.

Patrick Hruby is a columnist for Page 2.



