**THE CRUISE SHIP WEIGHT LOSS DIET by Roberta Klein, RD, MS, LDN, DC, CCC**

Did the title of my article make you laugh? Perhaps the first thing that popped into your head was -- 'Cruises are all about fun and over-indulgence! They can't possibly have anything to do with health, can they?' Or maybe you scoffed and thought -- 'Why in heaven's name would a licensed nutritionist endorse a cruise vacation?'

Okay, I understand how it may at first sound far-fetched when we consider that two thirds of American adults are either obese or overweight. Years ago, before I became a CCC (Certified Cruise Counselor) I used to think of cruises as buffets, buffets and more buffets (something more in the line of a Roman orgy at sea). I considered it common knowledge that the reason people love to cruise is because of all the 'over-the-top' onboard dining experiences. [By the way – dining is actually the third or possibly even fourth most cited reason for taking a cruise. The number one reason cruising has become so popular is because it allows visits to multiple destinations in a shorter period of time; and some additional reasons like "fun" and "relaxation" are right up there near the top along with getting "more bang for the buck". Just try comparing the cost of a land vacation in Europe (hotels & restaurants for example) to a cruise. You will discover that the cruise offers a far better value].

But getting back to the mental picture of cruises and buffets; no one expected you to immediately conjure up thoughts of health. But there some equally compelling facts about the cruise experience that may help put everything in perspective.

Losing (and maintaining) weight is all about making good choices. Every meal we plan (or perhaps don't plan and thus end up simply grabbing whatever is convenient or available) represents a choice – a decision made. A decision that eventually determines what we weigh.

Putting aside the misconceptions, we should evaluate the cruise experience and the better cruise ships for what they really are – floating resorts. That's right – a cruise ship is a vacation oasis that moves you from port to port so you can experience more of what the world has to offer. Leaving a discussion of the ports-of-call for another time, I want to focus on the actual experience of being on the ship. Cruise ships today are NOTHING like they were thirty (or even ten) years ago. The focus on board, if you choose, can be all about health and well-being. It can be about taking a vacation that brings you back "revitalized and new".

Let's begin with the onboard fitness centers. The fitness centers are fabulously equipped and included in the price of the cruise. They provide the opportunity to try out state-of-the art equipment and get the best possible workout. They present a great opportunity for you to 'jump start' a fitness program and find the best method for you to build and tone muscle -- because let's face it – if you want to lose or maintain weight – it's to your advantage to gain muscle mass. Muscle tissue burns calories and raises our BMR. The more calories burned – the easier it is to lose and maintain a healthy weight.

Which brings up the next question "why do we overeat"? That varies for everyone. For me, I can sum it all up in two words – boredom or stress! Boredom, I promise you will never be a problem on a cruise ship – with so much for every one of every age and inclination to do at every hour of the day and night, there is absolutely no opportunity for boredom. (I will also address onboard ship activities in a future article). But at any rate, consider that one eating 'trigger' solved. That brings us to the matter of "stress eating". I'll admit it – I make all my worst eating decisions when I'm stressed. That's pretty much universal and true for most of us. And that's why I want to address the onboard spa experience and why it's so absolutely wonderful. Spas are just one more feature where cruise ships excel. Their spas offer the upmost in pampering and de-stressing. Let's face it, everyone benefits from a bit of pampering on occasion. Whether you indulge in a deep-muscle massage, the pools, the hot tubs, the saunas or just some incredible aroma-therapy – you will leave your vacation renewed, regenerated and invigorated – if you so choose.

And what about onboard meals? Do cruise ships really encourage constant gorging and 'pigging out'? NOT at all! The dining room experiences are totally focused on new and different regional and cultural foods. On the better ships, world-class chefs begin with the freshest and finest ingredients, they prepare them to order and serve up beautiful food with the greatest attention to detail. Each meal features colorful and healthfully cooked vegetables and provides an educational experience in itself. We always go home armed with new recipes to try. The mindless eating that so often gets us into trouble is replaced by pure pleasure. Leaving a cruise vacation with delightful memories of lingering over dinner with friends and family, while savoring every bite of sensibly-portioned food, is the norm and not at all the exception for those who cruise.