

January 2013

January: Winter Weather- Staying Healthy and Safe

When the Weather Gets Cold: Winter Health Problems

Bright blue skies, blankets of snow, crisp days and cozy nights by a crackling fire. For many people, winter is a welcome time of year. But for people with certain diseases like **arthritis**, it can be a pain—literally. While cold weather doesn't cause arthritis or most other conditions that get worse when temperatures drop, it can cause problems for people who have them. If you've got one of these conditions, here's what you need to know to survive winter's chill.

There's very little research showing that cold weather directly causes arthritis or alters its course. So why does the cold seem to make arthritis feel worse? As the weather changes, so can the pressure in your joints. If you think of the tissues surrounding the joint as a balloon, Gourley explains, the balloon around the joint will expand a little when air pressure is low. The expanding tissues put pressure on the joint. People can actually feel changes in air pressure in their joints, which is why some people say they can predict the weather by the pain in their joints.

"Do what you can to keep warm," Gourley says. "Bundle up from head to toe in several layers, preheat the car before getting into it and make sure your home or apartment is kept warm." Other suggestions: Sleep under an electric blanket, warm clothing in the dryer before dressing and drink warm or hot drinks, such as coffee, tea or hot chocolate. It's also important to keep moving, Gourley says. Try exercising the affected joints before going out in the cold weather. It also helps to maintain a regular exercise program year round. Exercise will not only loosen stiff joints, but will help prevent winter weight gain that puts more stress on painful joints.

Joint stiffness isn't the only problem low temperatures can cause. **Raynaud's disease** is a condition in which the blood vessels quickly narrow, reducing the flow of blood and causing the skin on the fingers, toes and even the nose to temporarily turn white, then bluish. As blood flow returns, the skin turns red and becomes painful. In rare severe cases, Raynaud's can cause skin sores or tissue death (gangrene) at the tips of the fingers and toes.

As with arthritis, the best advice for people with Raynaud's is to keep warm. "Wear mittens as opposed to gloves," Gourley advises. That way, the fingers can help keep each other warm.

Sjögren's syndrome is another condition that can get worse in colder weather. In Sjögren's syndrome, the immune system attacks the body's moisture-producing glands, leading to dryness of the eyes, mouth and other tissues. Cool, dry weather can exacerbate the situation. People with Sjögren's syndrome need to add moisture back into the environment when the air is dry.

Run a humidifier to raise the humidity level in your home and use lotions after bathing to keep skin moist. Use artificial tears for dry eyes and keep a water bottle on hand to sip to relieve dry mouth. Be careful about using mouthwashes with alcohol or over-the-counter cold remedies, either of which can worsen dryness.

Many prescription medications, including antidepressants and high blood pressure medications, can also cause dry mouth. If you're taking these medications and having trouble with dry tissues, ask your doctor about the possibility of changing your medication or combating dryness with other treatments. In more severe cases, your doctor may prescribe a medication to increase saliva flow or recommend a simple medical procedure to block the drainage of tears out of your eyes, leaving more natural tears in the eyes to moisten and lubricate them.

Osteoporosis—in which the bones become porous and prone to fracture—may not itself worsen with cold. However, icy steps and walkways in the wintertime can present a particular danger to people whose bones are fragile. Slipping and falling can cause painful fractures that can be slow to heal and even disabling. If you have osteoporosis, in addition to following the treatment plan your doctor prescribes, it's important to take measures to reduce your risk of falling. Make sure you have handrails on your porch, keep sidewalks free of snow and ice, and avoid wearing shoes with slippery soles. If you take medications that affect your balance or stability, ask your doctor about the possibility of changing medications, or at least the timing of medications so that they're less likely to interfere with daytime activities.

Cold weather may also affect people with **certain lung diseases**. For example, asthma can be triggered in some people by physical activity in cold weather. Rheumatoid lung disease, caused by the same immune response that affects the joints of people with rheumatoid arthritis, is characterized by shortness of breath, cough, chest pain and fever. For people with rheumatoid lung disease, winter air can aggravate problems breathing. "If you have marginal breathing capacity and you compromise that in any way," Gourley says, "cold winter air can make breathing worse." If you have difficulty breathing, try a face mask when you need to go out in the cold. Such masks, which can be found at many outdoor and sporting goods stores, cover your mouth and use the heat from your own breathing to warm the air before it enters your lungs. If you have symptoms brought on by cold weather, be sure to mention them to your doctor.

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Conquering the chilly workouts of winter

The short days, the weak sun, and the warm beds of winter can wreak havoc on your fitness routine. As the outside temperature plummets, so too can the will to brave the elements for outdoor exercise. Experts say as long as you layer up, drink up and tune into how cold is just too cold it shouldn't impact your fitness.

"Come with a different game plan for the winter," advises Jessica Matthews, an exercise physiologist with the American Council on Exercise (ACE). "Motivation tends to wane a bit, so explore different activities, including things you can do in your own home. Have a flexible approach to your fitness routine as the weather changes."

If you're keen to exercise outside in all seasons, says Matthews, learn to dress for workout success. "Wear layers. That's really important when it's cold outside and make sure you're not becoming wet. Heavy cotton soaks up sweat, so you might want to stick with wool or polyester: something water repellent."

Matthews suggests a first layer of lightweight synthetic. "The second can be a little heavier, but still avoid heavy cotton," she said. And don't leave home without hat and gloves. Heat loss from the head alone is about 50 percent at the freezing mark, according to ACE's safety tips for cold weather.

Keeping hands and feet warm is crucial because in cold the body shunts blood away from the extremities to warm internal organs at the center. "In temperatures below zero, consider a scarf or face mask, kept loosely over mouth, to warm the air a little bit before it gets into your body," Matthews said.

"Check the air temperature and wind chill factor before exercising in the cold," Matthews said. "Data from the National Safety Council suggest that when the wind chill factor falls below -20 degrees Fahrenheit (-29 Celsius), a danger zone exists." Hypothermia is a potentially fatal condition. Warning signs include light-headedness, dizziness and lethargy.

"Those are the beginning stages," Matthews said. Most people are not likely to forget to layer up in the cold, but they will more easily neglect to hydrate. "It's too easy to forget to hydrate in the cold, and it's so important to stay hydrated in winter," said Matthews. "You are going to sweat." She suggests drinking up to 20 ounces (0.59 liters) of water two or three hours before working out.

The point is to stay physically active, regardless of the weather, even if that means just taking the dog for a walk (125 calories).

Source: Author: Dorene Internicola
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Cold Weather Tips When Exercising Outside

During the cold winter months it's always important to be prepared when venturing outside to exercise. Here are some tips to keep in mind when dealing with winter weather:

- Wear several layers, including gloves and a hat. Remove layers when you warm up, and replace them during the slower portions of your workout.
- If it is snowing or icy, be extra careful to not fall.

Remember, you can still become dehydrated in cold weather—so you still need plenty of fluid before, during, and after exercise.

Source: A.D.A.M., Inc.
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Healthy Recipe: Cranberry Veggie Risotto

Ingredients:

2 Tbsp. butter
1 small onion, diced
¾ cup Arborio rice
1 cup low-sodium vegetable broth
1 cup Portobello mushrooms, sliced
1 cup asparagus, diced
¾ cup sweetened dried cranberries
2 Tbsp. fresh basil, minced
1 Tbsp. Parmesan cheese

Instructions:

Preheat oven to 425° F. Grease a medium casserole dish. Melt butter in a large saucepan. Add onion and cook over medium heat until soft. Add rice; cook for 2 minutes. Add broth; bring to a boil for 2 minutes. Stir in remaining ingredients, except Parmesan cheese. Pour mixture into casserole dish. Cover and bake for 30 minutes. Stir in cheese. Serve immediately.

Yield: 4 servings
Each serving provides:
Calories: 323
Fat: 7 g
Protein: 8 g
Carbohydrates: 57 g
Cholesterol: 17 mg
Fiber: 4 g
Sodium: 233 mg

Source: Healthways, Inc.
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