



How Exercise and Nutrition Can Whip the Winter Blues *By Joe Stein, President*



The sun doesn't shine till nearly 8 AM. The afternoon ride home from work is shrouded in darkness, too. The trees have been bare for months. Icy rivers snake through Monmouth County. Is this Russia or Rumson? Is your weight up and your energy down as you live on the set of Doctor Zhivago?

If this seems all too familiar, you are not alone. Our bodies and minds have specific reactions to less sunlight, cold weather, reduced activity and the letdown of the post-holiday social schedule. Psychologists tell us that the neurotransmitter serotonin appears to be reduced during periods of depression. Serotonin helps us to feel relaxed, even sleepy, and reduces our sensitivity to pain. The human body can synthesize serotonin from the amino acid tryptophan, a substance found in high carbohydrate foods such as bread, pasta and potatoes. Is it any wonder some people self-medicate by eating more in the winter when they feel blue?

How to Whip Old Man Winter

Dress for Success

Cold weather is no excuse to stay indoors. If you dress in layers with breathable fabrics, you can stay warm and dry. Keeping your head and hands warm will help make you comfortable when it is bitter outside.

Get as Much Sunlight as Possible

On a clear day, engage in the pleasurable outdoor activities you enjoyed prior to the onset of cold weather. Use your barbecue; have a glass of wine on your deck; sip a latte outdoors at your favorite coffee house. Do not let this time of year prevent you from doing the little things you do in warm weather.

Enjoy a Winter Sport or Activity

Have you tried skiing, snow boarding, ice-skating or snowmobiling? Cross-country skiing and walking with snowshoes are two great non-impact aerobic activities. Why not fit in long walks with your dog, go horseback riding, or play basketball or tennis (yes, many nets are still up). How about taking a walk on the beach or playing touch football with the kids? Accept every gift Mother Nature offers during winter.

Reset Your Dietary Clock

In the more active summertime, we tend to eat a lighter diet, replete with salads, cold pasta dishes, fresh fruits and iced tea. Pot roasts, hearty stews and soups are the foods of winter. If you eat like a bear prior to hibernation, is it any surprise you have a lower energy level in winter? Increasing calories and decreasing activities is the formula for gaining weight and feeling lethargic. Take control by eating lighter and staying hydrated. Dehydration during winter is more of a problem than most people think.

Get Fit and Stay Fit

Nowadays, baseball players and other professional athletes train all year long. Strength training and cardiovascular conditioning are long-term, core elements to staying fit for the sport of living your life. If you feel cooped up and need help developing a strength training and cardio-conditioning plan, ask a professional for help. Most Certified Personal Fitness Trainers love to work with clients suffering from cabin fever. Repetitive aerobic activities such as walking, jogging, bench stepping, etc. increase the level of serotonin in the brain, thus reducing the sluggish blues that often accompany short days spent indoors. In a study published by *Psychosomatic Medicine* (September-October 2000,) Duke University Medical Center researchers studied people over 50 who suffered from major depressive disorders. Their findings indicated that performing cardiovascular exercises 45 minutes three times a week reduced or eliminated their symptoms to the same degree as prescription drugs.

Winter Blues or Clinical Depression?

Everyone gets the blues now and then. However, if your overall functioning continues to decline; if you have trouble sleeping; if your alcohol consumption increases; or you have a consistently low energy level, you may be clinically depressed. If this sounds like you, get professional help: talk to your doctor.

Down, but Not Out

If you are feeling knocked down because Old Man Winter has landed a few icy blows, its time to get off the mat and go to your corner to regroup. Do cardio, lift weights, eat lighter, get sun, and come out swinging. Remember, you are a contender—not a pretender. Now go get ‘em Champ!

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