

Top 6 Winter Health Hazards and How to Beat Them

Battling arthritis, dry skin, depression, weight gain

When the arctic winds blow, your health can suffer. What are the biggest challenges winter can bring? We asked six of our experts:

1. Dry, itchy skin

“Dry skin and the itching it causes are very common during winter,” says a dermatologist and recommends on how to combat them:

- Using creams instead of lotions. Thicker creams protect you better. “Use them generously, as often as needed.
- Protecting your face when out in the snow. Apply a layer of petroleum jelly or Aquaphor® ointment, even under winter gear, to reduce risks of windburn and frostbite.
- Seeking help for persistent itching. If moisturizers don’t temper the itching, see a dermatologist. You may have an underlying skin condition that needs to be addressed.
- To minimize dry skin all year, avoid long, hot showers and use warm, tepid water instead. Apply body lotion within three to five minutes to seal in moisture.

2. Arthritis pain

Winter tends to bring on more arthritic pains, says orthopaedic specialist. Cold and wet weather, along with changes in barometric pressure, are the most frequent culprits.

- To minimize the impact of cold weather on joints, dress warmly and in layers. When going outdoors, wear mittens, socks and a hat.
- Staying active throughout winter is good for the joints. Try cold-weather-friendly activities like walking indoors, swimming and aerobics classes.
- You can also consider vitamin D supplements. We don’t get enough vitamin D from the sunlight in the dreary winter months.

3. Depression

For some people, winter’s grayness, lack of sun and short days wear on the psyche. “It’s the time of year people with seasonal affective disorder (SAD) find most challenging,” says psychologist. In SAD, depression surfaces in late fall or early winter, fading by spring or early summer.

Treatment involves purchasing a light that emits 10,000 lux. Thirty 30 minutes of light exposure per day — ideally in the morning — are enough to lift mood. “Light therapy is effective for about 70 percent of those who use it as prescribed.”

Also, the reduced physical and social activity in winter can dampen anyone’s spirit. “We can all benefit from finding ways to keep our bodies moving and to liven up our social calendars.”

4. Colds and viruses

Fever, chills, head congestion, postnasal drip and cough — and sometimes nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. Each winter, this constellation of symptoms brings patients to family medicine - by a physician.

“Respiratory and flu-like illnesses are the most common acute illnesses we see,” the overwhelming majority are viral and do not require antibiotics.

When should you visit the doctor? Only if you’ve been sick for more than 10 days OR you can’t function well due to persistent shortness of breath, high fever, etc.

Your doctor will likely recommend rest, fluids, a bland diet and medications for specific symptoms. To stay healthy, follow this decades-old advice: Get proper rest, eat a healthy diet, wash your hands often, reduce stress and exercise.

5. Weight gain

Putting on weight between Thanksgiving and New Year’s prompts many people to start working out again. Check with your doctor before you begin, advises exercise physiologist.

For specific advice on the right routine, speak to an exercise professional. No two people are alike, so all exercise and workout routines should be customized. A customized workout will factor in your:

- Health history
- Cardiovascular endurance and strength
- Personal goals
- Times/days available for exercise
- Access to exercise equipment
- Favored forms of exercise and what you’ve done

Age should not determine which exercise is safe or effective for you — you should exercise to your ability.

Generally, 150 minutes of moderate-intensity cardiovascular exercise are recommended per week. As long as you exercise for 10 continuous minutes — even walking — it’s cardio. Add resistance training at least two days a week (not back-to-back), and stretch daily, or as needed.

6. Frostbite

You don’t have to be a mountain climber — the very young, the elderly and the chronically ill are susceptible to frostbite, too.

“The colder it is, the quicker frostbite can develop,” warns emergency medicine specialist. In frostbite, water in the skin’s soft tissues (typically the fingers, nose, toes and face) starts to freeze.

As damage continues, you can ultimately lose fingers, toes and extremities. Anyone with symptoms — including pain and skin discoloration — should get inside quickly, then head to the emergency room.

Warm up those extremities and keep them warm. Don’t let them re-freeze. A doctor’s examination is vital. Damage is often more severe than it appears.

It’s best to stay indoors in very cold weather. If you venture out, cover your hands, ears and face, and keep clothing dry.

Adopting these healthy habits should help you minimize winter’s hazards, and thrive — not merely survive — in the cold months.

Source: health.clevelandclinic.org