

You don't have to cave in to the cold

Exercise, carbs, vitamins and a vacation can help beat those winter woes

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Winter instinctually feels like a time to dig in, slow down and eat heartily.

When squirrels and bears do it, it's viewed as the natural and majestic order of things. Too bad winter weight gain and sloth aren't regarded with the same respect in humans.

Mind you, human hibernation is not as peculiar as it sounds.

Impoverished farmers used to survive winter famine conditions in the northern Pskov region of Russia by spending half the year in bed.

At first snow, families would gather around the stove, and go to sleep. Once a day, they'd wake for a piece of hard bread and water, then go to sleep again. They'd take turns keeping the fire going. After six months of this winter sleep, or lotska, everyone would stand up and get to work on summer chores.

Here are some other ideas for winter survival and rejuvenation.

Check out a few of the following and we guarantee you'll emerge from the cold, dark season looking and feeling -- and certainly smelling -- a whole lot better than those hibernating Russian forbears.

1. Go ahead, eat those carbohydrates.

Reduced sun exposure can lead the body to produce less serotonin, the "feel-good"



CREDIT: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun

When winter streets are too slippery for running, Spanish Banks offers miles of sandy terrain for those seeking a challenge.



CREDIT: Peter Battistoni, Vancouver Sun Files

Root vegetables, like those in this chicken stew, helps produce serotonin, the 'feel-good' brain chemical.

brain chemical.

Our bodies compensate by creating cravings for carbohydrates, which help produce serotonin.

"It's okay to listen to your craving, but look for high-quality carbs such as sweet potatoes, root vegetables, squash and pumpkin," says dietitian Gloria Tsang of healthcastle.com.

Whole grains, omega-3 fatty acids in fish oil, and vitamin B complex also help boost serotonin production, Tsang says.

2. De-clutter your home.

It's surprisingly liberating. But there's no need to be coldly practical. Keep things that make you smile. Get rid of stuff that brings bad memories.

Not sure if you're really ready to let go of some stuff? Put it in a "maybe" box and let it sit in transition for a while. Donate things you don't need.

3. Miss the Grouse Grind? Train opposing muscle groups.

The Grouse Grind closed last week. If you're a hiker, try lane swimming instead.

Hiking is largely focused on the lower body. Swimming's upper body component will round out your muscle balance and symmetry. Upper body and core strength will also help your balance.

4. Check out vitamin D.

Weak winter sun means your body will absorb less vitamin D. Should you take vitamin D supplements? It's said to prevent osteoporosis, depression, bowel cancer and breast cancer, and affect diabetes and obesity.

"It's still a raging controversy. Many say it's overrated," says dermatologist Jason Rivers, of Pacific Dermaesthetics in Vancouver.

Nevertheless, about 800 IU of vitamin D a day in the winter, in conjunction with calcium, seems a reasonable approach.

"Just popping vitamin D is not necessarily the answer," Rivers says. "Vitamin D causes calcium absorption, which helps prevent osteoporosis. Whether the vitamin D/calcium combination is important in the prevention of cancer is not totally clear."

5. Recharge your summer sport.

Muscles strengthen in the way they're used. If you always work your biceps in a contraction, they will be strong in a contraction, but not in a lengthened position.

Working your sport's important muscle groups in a different way gives them a stimulus to adapt to a greater range of ability, says Rhianne Mari, fitness program assistant with BC Recreation and Parks Association.

If it's too cold and slippery for running, try skating instead. You'll still be working those hip flexors, glutes and hamstrings, but the addition of that side-to-side motion means stronger, healthier muscles overall, Mari says.

If you're a tennis player, try cross-country skiing.

6. Fix something.

If you're stuck at home on a cold, dark rainy day, tape a torn book cover, fix that closet door or sew that seam. It'll make you feel good.

7. Set boundaries around when you work.

If you can, try to work when you're productive.

"If you're a morning person, get up at six and crank it out," says Andreas Hesse, a Vancouver business coach with Clear HR Consulting. "When you're less productive, use that time to go to the gym or reply to e-mail."

8. Create a comfortable, relaxing, stress-free zone somewhere in your home.

It could be your front entrance, the bathtub, or a reading corner. Go there and feel good.

9. Buy a pedometer.

You're more likely to walk more if you use one, and that means you'll get healthier and lower your body mass index and blood pressure, according to a new review in the November Journal of the American Medical Association.

Pedometers are small devices worn at the hip that count the number of steps you walk each day.

10. Take a vacation.

For many business owners, taking time for themselves is very low on the priority list, Hesse says. They need to remember that a little time off to relax and rejuvenate means they'll come back refocused and recharged.

"The more time they take off, the more money they make. If they are complaining about feeling really stressed out, or not sleeping very much, or feel like they are really spinning their wheels and certain projects are taking longer than they normally should, they need a break," Hesse says.

11. Give nature a little help.

If you want to look young, the bottom line is don't smoke and avoid sun-bathing, Rivers says.

If you want medical or surgical help, dermatological treatments include topical vitamin A acids, glycolic acids, chemical peels, intense pulsed light treatment and various laser techniques, Rivers says.

12. Pamper that cold.

You may be able to shorten the duration of your cold symptoms by eating yogurt with active culture three times daily, or taking 1,000 mg of vitamin C

daily while you're suffering, Tsang says.

Start as soon as you feel a cold coming on, and stop once you feel better, she says.

13. Look back at the year.

Review your athletic, business, personal or professional year. In order to know where you're going, it's helpful to know where you've been. What worked? What didn't? Heal, reflect, visualize and lay the foundation for next year.

14. Drink lots of water.

Even the impoverished farmers of Pskov knew to guzzle their H2O.

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