

Beat the Winter Blues

It's that time of the year again. The days shorter, the temperature drops and colds and flu's are passed around quicker than you can reach for a tissue. It's the winter season and for some of us the cold, dark days can leave us feeling tired, lethargic, prone to overeating and just feeling rather low. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that tends to occur during the winter months and is thought to affect more than 2 million people across the UK (1). But by putting some healthy habits in place we can enjoy good health and all that this wonderful season has to offer.



Boost your diet

Your mind may be crying out for those comforting sugary or starchy foods as the weather turns cold but with knowledge and foresight you can choose a healthier option and still feel satisfied. Instead of the refined white stuff, (white bread, pasta, rice, flour) choose whole grain versions which still retain the fibre and valuable energy-supporting B-vitamins and as such are much better than the refined version at satisfying your appetite, regulating your mood and energy and helping you manage stress. If you are concerned about weight gain then reduce all carbohydrate portions and avoid them completely after 4pm. For the sweet tooth - safer sugar substitutes and sweeteners include stevia, xylitol, honey in small amounts, liquorice root, fruit and cinnamon.

Make sure your diet is loaded with an abundance and variety of fruits and vegetables in season. Soup is very warming and a great way of maximising your vegetable and fibre intake. Pumpkins, squashes, leeks and sweet potatoes make an excellent seasonal base for soups and stews. Add beans and lentils for a great source of protein and fibre.

The use of stimulants such as coffee, sugar, energy drinks, alcohol, cigarettes and illicit drugs is counter-productive, can leave you feeling down-right awful and trap you in an addictive cycle you find extremely difficult to climb out of. If you provide your body with the nutrients it needs from an unprocessed, healthy, plant-rich diet and provide adequate hydration in the form of water, herbal teas, fresh juices and smoothies, then you shouldn't feel the need for artificial stimulants.

Boost your mood

Laura's favourite foods

Protein foods,
oily fish,
nuts and seeds,
water,
avocados,
leafy greens,
curry spices,
dark chocolate (2 squares).

Get active

In the cold months, the temptation is to stay inside and curl up on the sofa, however getting active can help to boost energy levels, improve mood and help control your appetite. During the winter months, there are changes in serotonin, a hormone involved in regulating energy levels, eating behaviour and mood (3), that may explain why some people experience depression and low energy levels (2). Physical activity has been shown to boost serotonin levels and improve mood (3). In addition, exercise helps to reduce appetite and the desire to eat (4) helping to curb unnecessary winter weight gain. Click on our Get Active guide for some great ideas of how to get active this winter.

Balance your energy levels

A common mistake is skipping breakfast or having a sugary cereal and then falling prey to extreme cravings mid morning. We then find



ourselves reaching for the quick fix; coffee and a pastry or biscuits. This is usually due to fluctuations in our blood sugar levels. It is crucial for short and long-term health to moderate your blood sugar and this starts with a balanced breakfast. It doesn't have to be large but should ideally contain a source of protein such as eggs, nuts and seeds, a protein shake or fish. If you are always rushing out the door there are some great snack bars that you can keep in your desk drawer or handbag for such times. Check your health store or supermarket for healthy options such as Nak'd, Trek, Bounce Balls and 9-bars. In fact it is good to try including a source of protein with each meal and snack. Protein foods not only help moderate appetite but they are rich in the amino acid tryptophan which our body converts to serotonin, our 'happy hormone' and melatonin, our natural 'sleeping tablet'.

Get fresh air and natural sunlight

One research study found that a daily 60-minute walk outdoors in the natural light improved mood and symptoms of SAD and was found to be as effective as receiving artificial light therapy (5). Getting outside in the wintery months can not only increase your exposure to natural light, but also get you out into the fresh air, great for improving alertness and concentration when stuck in the office all day. Try taking a walk or run at midday or get out and about during the daylight to avoid feeling sluggish and tired when the sun sets early. Take a walk over your lunch break or plan a forest walk with the family over the weekends. See our Get Active guide for some great ideas

During the winter months, there are also changes in Vitamin D levels. Vitamin D is made in our bodies when we are exposed to sunlight. It is found in very small amounts in some foods, but generally we don't get enough vitamin D here in the UK and that is especially true in the winter-time. Having low vitamin D levels can leave us feeling a little down and leave our immune system compromised and vulnerable to coughs and colds.

Christle's trainer tip

Shift your workout to the morning or lunchtime to make the most of the daylight. That way you are less likely to make excuses when the sun sets early.

Other important nutrients to boost mood and energy include omega 3, B-vitamins, magnesium, calcium and anti-oxidants. If you want to use supplements, please purchase good quality products that are free from cheap, less effective forms, fillers and artificial ingredients. When it comes to nutritional supplements it's so important to know what you are putting into your body. Please seek professional advice so that you have the correct supplements for you.

Here are some personal favourites:

[Nutri Ultramuscleze](#): Magnesium and B-vitamins in powder form to support mood, sleep and energy.

[Vitamin D](#): Cytoplan food state vitamin D3

[Omega 3](#): Nutri Eskimo Brainsharp

[All in One](#): Terra Nova Life Drink: vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, omega 3, enzymes, probiotics and more.

If you are on medication consult a nutritional therapist or your doctor before taking any supplements as they may interact with your medication.

Get Active

Bored of the usual gym routine, try these alternatives to the gym

1. Join a walking group in [London](#)
2. Try a outdoor boot camp or parkrun – click [here](#) for more info
3. Try a indoor cycling trail route at the Pedal Studio
4. Workout in the comfort of your own home - try free online workouts from [Befit LionsGate](#)

Article written in collaboration: Christle Coxon (exercise science) and Laura Mussell (nutritional therapy).

See Christle's blog ccfitnessblog.wordpress.com

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