

PREPARE YOUR WINTER WELLBEING TOOLKIT

Image: Razbitnov © 123RF.com

Henri Davy and **Elettra Scrivo** find out how physical, social, emotional and intellectual lifestyle habits can help to see us through the challenges of winter in a healthier and happier way

It may be called the season to be jolly, but winter can be a challenging time for health. Dark, cold nights make it less appealing to get fresh air; and if we are feeling rundown, we may be more prone to seasonal bugs. Factor in (unless we're in another lockdown) the party season and a bit of overindulgence, and our health may feel the strain.

Nourish

Yet there are positive steps we can take to prepare our immune systems. Victoria Hamilton, a registered nutritional therapist who specialises in autoimmune diseases, says focusing on digestive health is advisable because 70-80% of immune cells are located in the digestive system. She recommends a variety of high fibre foods to aid digestion and to allow good gut bacteria to thrive, benefiting the immune system. In addition, antioxidants and polyphenols found in the colourful pigments in fruit and vegetables can “help to reduce oxidative stress in your body so that your immune system isn't suppressed”, she says.

Dreary weather and less sunlight also mean our bodies cannot manufacture enough vitamin D. Although most commonly associated with bone health, vitamin D's connection to the immune system should not be overlooked. “You

IN BRIEF

- Positive nutrition and lifestyle steps can help to support the immune system during winter.
- Late nights and early mornings can cause blood sugar imbalances, driving appetite for sugary and fatty foods.
- Stress can suppress the immune system. Lifestyle habits focusing on self-care can help to lower stress.

can get rundown [if low in vitamin D] because vitamin D acts as a hormone and does all sorts of different jobs, particularly for the immune system,” says Hamilton. In this case, if you do get a cold, “you're going to get a more exaggerated response and feel a lot sicker”.

Oily fish is a rich source of vitamin D, but consuming the recommended 10 micrograms a day through food is still a challenge, particularly if you follow a plant based diet. Therefore, NHS advice is for everyone to supplement this micronutrient in autumn and winter. A registered nutritional therapist or GP can offer a test to determine whether your vitamin D levels are low.

Relax

Work deadlines, family commitments

and seasonal holidays can all contribute to increased stress towards the end of the year. Stress causes a rise in the hormone cortisol, which can suppress the immune system and make you more vulnerable, Hamilton explains. Avoiding stressors may be impossible, but having a self-care routine can make us more resilient. Sticking to a routine can be part of this.

“The more that you are able to live each day in the same way — eat, go to bed, get up and exercise at the same time — the more your circadian rhythm improves, which the body loves,” says Hamilton. Winter is also a time to prioritise sleep, ideally for eight or more hours, which allows the immune cells to be restored, lessening the chances of succumbing to an infection.

Move

Movement is another way to support your immune system, even though your instincts may tell you to curl up in front of a fire. “If you're not out walking or jogging in winter, bring your exercise indoors,” says Hamilton. Squats and stretches are effective to break up hours sitting at a desk. Or 10 minutes of HIIT, strength training, Pilates or yoga are all good alternatives.

If you can brave the weather, chartered psychologist Dr Audrey Tang says that exercising outside



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produces dopamine (the ‘feel good’ neurotransmitter) and endorphins (our body’s natural pain reliever). “Exercise with a friend and you’ll also boost oxytocin [a hormone associated with social bonding],” she adds.

Recuperate

Yet seasonal celebrations can at times be draining; whether it’s food, alcohol or social interaction, there is such a thing as too much of a good thing. “Try not to plan too many engagements back-to-back,” says Tang. “Reflect on who you really want to put in the time and effort to see — then actively seek those people out... and you’ll be too busy for anyone else!”

Tang also advises setting limits on your time by saying you will ‘drop in’, making it clear that you don’t intend to spend the whole night. She also says: “Find some time to recharge in a way that suits you best afterwards!”

Be balanced

When faced with the temptation of party food, healthy eating can also go out of the window. Registered nutritional therapist Georgie Grant suggests eating a small balanced snack or meal before going out. Oatcakes with hummus or apple slices with almond butter are great little bites, but if you aren’t sure what the party food is going to be like, a bowl of soup isn’t a bad choice either. By reducing hunger pangs

and balancing blood sugar levels, she says, cravings for sugary, fatty foods may be lessened.

Free flowing alcohol can be another trial and NHS guidelines recommend no more than 14 units per week for both men and women. “Having a glass of water between every alcoholic drink can be a good way to stay hydrated and balance your intake, as can alternating festive cocktails with their non-alcoholic counterparts,” says Grant.

Grant explains that late nights and early starts can also affect food cravings the next day “by increasing levels of ghrelin (our ‘hunger hormone’) and reducing levels of leptin, which helps to regulate our food intake and energy expenditure.” She suggests scheduling in one or two commitment free evenings to rest and catch up on sleep. Eating balanced, healthy meals should also help to mitigate cravings for less healthy foods.

Be curious

On the other hand, if winter evenings do mean staying in, there is always the old fashioned telephone call catch up from the comfort of your sofa. Time at home can also be a chance to focus on intellectual stimulation. “Giving the brain a little stimulation through an intellectual challenge can be a great way to boost our mental wellness,” says Tang. Sudoku or crosswords may do the job, or activities such as quilting,

crochet or photography may help to boost memory performance.

Taking on any new challenge might initially put us out of our comfort zone, says Tang, “as we recognise fear more easily than happiness, and physically we tend to do things that keep us comfortable”. She says a way out of this rut is to look at change as having three zones: the comfort zone where we spend the most time; the stretch zone; and the panic zone.

Our brains and bodies will want to avoid the panic zone but “stretching can actually feel quite nice”, says Tang. She suggests “doing something — anything at all that pushes you a little into the stretch zone every day.” This might be the first steps to learn a new skill. “When you get used to the stretch, you’ll find that becomes comfortable, and suddenly your old ‘panic zone’ has moved to become the new ‘stretch zone’.”

Tang also explains how curiosity, which is linked to mental stimulation, is most commonly associated with high levels of happiness. She advises boosting your “happiness quota” by reading one new article which interests you — before scrolling through social media. Other home activities she recommends include: finding a charity to support; cooking something new; reading and writing; ‘geocaching’ (online treasure hunts); DIY or changing a room; planning an adventure for better weather; revamping your wardrobe with a fashion show and clothing exchange with friends; making (and using!) a home gym or obstacle course; building a den with your children; admiring the stars while roasting marshmallows; or trying an online quiz or escape room game with friends.

With a little self-care, winter does not have to be tiring and difficult; but if you do still find it cold and draining, remember that nothing lasts forever — would we appreciate spring so much without enduring winter first? And with a decent winter self-care tool kit, we may even meet the new season in better health.

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