

THE WINTER BLAHS

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Hopefully you are starting to prepare for the holiday season and will include in your New Year's resolution, to get active and stay fit. Unfortunately, this is the time of year many people dread – we'll call it the 'Winter Blahs'. It's now cold and snowy – unless we get really lucky this year! Or on the other hand, you could be planning to head South for a well deserved vacation or enjoying some well deserved family time.

The weather can still have a great impact on our health and well being. During the Summer, excessive heat and humidity can be quite hard on a lot of people, especially as we get older. In the Winter, the problem is of a different nature – a lack humidity dries our skin and mucus membranes and cold weather, snow and ice can restrict our activities by keeping us inside. This decreases our activity level and has an impact on our health and well being.

Being less active not only affects your level of fitness but also how we feel – hence the 'winter blahs'. Most of the time, a change of scenery is beneficial – visiting family or friends, or getting out around town. Such activities and social interaction can help us get through the next couple of months. A hug from a loved one, being around small children or your grandchildren can put a smile on your face and brighten up your day!

If you are feeling more 'out of sorts' than normal or if the 'blahs' are affecting your mood, and your relationships, please talk to your health care professional. Sometimes, you just need someone else to 'put things in perspective' or at other times you may need a health care professional who specializes in counselling. Perhaps your family physician may feel that medication is warranted. Please do not hesitate to talk to these people.

One theory behind Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is that a reduction in daylight can diminish the amounts of the various neurotransmitters (neuromessengers) that conduct signals in the brain. Another is that the changing hours of sunlight disturbs a person's ability to maintain a normal sleep/wake cycle. During the winter, people with SAD tend to oversleep, run out of energy, experience a loss of concentration, feel irritated and put on extra pounds because they crave carbohydrates and sweets. According to Dr. Norman Rosenthal, who has been studying SAD for almost 20 years, and authored the book Winter Blues, there is a steep drop-off in the prevalence of SAD south of the 39th parallel. He attributes this to longer days with more direct sunlight.

There are a variety of activities which you can choose to stay active and help keep your body and mind healthy during our snowy season. It will not be too long until the days are a little longer and the sun is a bit warmer.

Activity Ideas

- **'Fit in 15'**--this is a new web based exercise program at www.fitin15.ca that allows you to pick your own exercises and create a 15 minute a day program. You can also sign up for inspirational messages to help keep you on track with your fitness activities. It is easy, fun and practical (no expensive equipment needed).
- **Walk in the mall** – many of the malls have walking clubs. Please do not hesitate to contact your local mall.
- **Start swimming** – pick a warm pool which tends to be easier on stiff joints.
- **Water exercise classes** – there are a couple of options – shallow water exercises if you can't swim or deep water with a water vest or water belt to keep your upper torso above water. This tends to be easier on the ankles, knees, hips and lower back.
- **Elder-aerobics classes** – many of the fitness facilities now have classes which are designed for

more mature participants.

- **Play with your grandchildren!**
- **Stay active around the house** – get a head start on spring cleaning.

One other aspect of our well being in the winter is the benefit of getting a bit of sun. This is good for our complexion and can help convert vitamin D. Full spectrum lighting is often used by individuals who find themselves sensitive to the decreased amount of sunlight during the Winter months.

Before you know it, the snow will be gone and the days will be gradually be getting longer. By the time Spring comes around we will all have a much bigger smile on our faces!

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