

Walking in a Winter Wonderland

Yes, it's cold. Sure, there's the snow and ice. But research shows that these conditions make strolling this season all the more healthful—delivering a higher calorie burn, better overall health, less stress, and even a sunnier mood.

BY ISABEL BURTON

EVE/MALAMY



Chaya Harris, a former public school teacher, considers outdoor walks to be an essential part of her self-care routine. “These walks ground me and allow me to release any tension or stress I’m feeling. Walking reminds me of the small wonders in life, like the birds chirping,” she says. In fact, Harris so believes in the physical and psychological power of walking and spending time outdoors, she’s taken on the role of national program director for Outdoor Afro, an organization committed to celebrating Black connections and leadership in nature. There, she leads 100-plus volunteers in outdoor adventures.

Harris has the right idea, according to a range of experts. Taking walks can level-up your health; do it outside and you’ll reap a whole host of additional benefits. But what about as the weather gets colder? Well, it turns out that if you wander in the winter, when the temps are low and the conditions a bit harsher, your body and brain gain significant, long-lasting upgrades. Here, everything you need to know about braving the cold for a stroll.

WALKING IS GREAT EXERCISE

Besides burning calories and maintaining muscle, just two and a half hours of walking a week (21 minutes a day!) is enough to bump up your heart health, lower blood pressure, and reduce the odds of certain cancers and chronic disease, according to a report published by Harvard Health. And the physical perks manifest in more surprising ways as well. “Research shows that body weight on your feet while exercising compresses the major arteries,

increasing blood flow to the brain,” explains Joanna Hall, a walking coach and the creator and founder of WalkActive, an educational walking program.

Walking on uneven surfaces drastically improves balance, adds Tina Vindum, founder and president of the Outdoor Fitness Institute, citing a study out of the Oregon Research Institute. “One of the



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goals in walking outdoors is to develop your foot sensitivity. Reflexologists believe that the uneven landscape can stimulate acupressure points in the soles of the feet to relieve pain, improve sleep patterns, and enhance overall well-being,” says Vindum.

A basic stroll can also be the antidote to the lethargy that tends to set in during these darker months. “Dozens of studies find that about 90 percent of people report feeling more energetic after a single bout of low-to-moderate-intensity exercise lasting from about 20 to 75 minutes,” says Patrick O’Connor, PhD, a kinesiology professor at the University of Georgia who has studied the exercise-

GEAR UP

“We have a saying at Outdoor Fitness: There’s no such thing as inappropriate weather, only inappropriate clothing,” says Vindum. “Dressing appropriately is the best defense against a drop in your body temperature, and the ticket to a great workout in chilly weather.” Cold-weather dressing is all about layers and fabrics. Avoid wearing cotton, which loses much of its insulating capabilities when it’s wet—cotton clothing can actually contribute to hypothermia. Technical fabrics, such as Polartec and Gore-Tex, are created to function in frigid temperatures. Follow Vindum’s guidelines for maintaining your core temperature and protecting your body.

1

Layer clothing.

Several thin layers work better than one heavy layer. Layers are also easier to add and remove to regulate temperature.

2

Cover your head.

A good amount of body heat can be lost through your head. Always wear a hat or a headband.

3

Wear gloves.

To insulate and protect your hands, choose lightweight gloves that provide the greatest warmth and flexibility, preferably with rubberized or leather strips on the palm for gripping equipment.

4

Cover your mouth.

A scarf or a mask will help to warm the air before you breathe it. This is especially important if you have respiratory problems, such as asthma, which are irritated by cold air.

5

Stay dry.

Wet, damp clothing—from either perspiration or precipitation—significantly increases heat loss.

6

Keep your feet dry.

Choose socks made of polypropylene, wool, or another fabric that wicks moisture and retains insulation when feet get wet.

energy link. “Research suggests it’s changes in several neurotransmitters, like dopamine and norepinephrine, that likely contribute to post-exercise energy. What’s more, studies have found that feelings of energy are higher after exercising outside compared to indoors, even when the intensity and duration is the same.”

And that energy seems to last. One study found that women who took a moderate-to-vigorous walk around 8 A.M. were more active for the rest of the day. Not only that, but they ate less as a result. Another study made a key connection between exercise and appetite suppression, possibly due to the production of a hormone called growth differentiation factor 15 (GDF15), which may help control feelings of hunger and responses to food.

LOW TEMPS BOOST THE BENEFITS

Cold weather may invite you to stay huddled inside, but it’s actually a reason to nudge yourself out. Exposure to low temperatures has been proven to shift body fat composition by activating production of brown fat, a healthy type of fat that burns a surplus of calories to create heat and manage body temperature, according to research from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In fact, one study in the *American Journal of Human Biology* found that people burn 34 percent more calories when they hike in cold weather than when doing so in warmer conditions.

Add to that science from NIH that finds exercising when it’s frosty is linked to greater endurance, plus that cold is associated with lower inflammation, better-quality sleep, muscle and joint health, a stronger immune system (walking in winter actually increases the number of immune cells in your body), and a more positive mood. Certain neurotransmitters, epinephrine and norepinephrine, triggered by cold make us more alert and motivated to move. And they linger, so post-shivering, you’ll still feel energized, focused, and upbeat.

Even the discomfort is good for you. The temporary hardship adds a challenge to contend with, which jump-starts something called hormesis, a type of “good” stress that strengthens your body and mind. Getting out of your own head to deal with the conditions bolsters your mental fitness, making you better able to stay calm and clearheaded when facing real-world stressors, as does navigating your unpredictable surrounding landscape—like watching for icy or muddy patches. Essentially, the cold acts like a workout for your brain.

MORE ON THOSE MENTAL GAINS

Exercise has one of the most profound impacts on psychological health, confirms Jacob Meyer, PhD, director of the Wellbeing and Exercise Laboratory at Iowa State University. “It’s been shown to reduce anxiety, stress, and depression both in the short time you’re moving and over the long term when you establish a regular routine.” He points out that this effect is especially powerful in the colder, more dreary months, when seasonal affective disorder can take hold. “When winter causes people to move less, even a small amount of time spent walking outside can have a bigger positive impact than usual,” he explains.

When it comes to mental well-being, the environmental factor is real, contributing to 70 percent of our stress, says Vindum. The shocking reality is that most people spend over 90 percent of their waking hours indoors. “In today’s automated world of technology and urban living, our bonds with nature have been

fractured, and as a result, people are more rushed, stressed, overweight, and depressed than ever before,” she says. But perhaps equally surprising, this is an issue that’s easily rectified. You don’t need access to the woods or the seaside to benefit from an outdoor walk. Even just exploring your neighborhood, a local park, or any path will change your mindset for the better. An app like AllTrails helps you find local trails to walk and provides you with all the data you need to create your routine. When you’re wandering, tune in to the sounds around you. One study has shown that listening to nature sounds—like birds, crunching leaves, or snow—can increase relaxation by a further 30 percent.

Although spring and summer may seem like obvious times to enjoy a scenic walk, the winter months provide just as much beauty and sense of awe. One study out of the University of Michigan found that people enjoyed the same boosts in focus and even memory when they walked outdoors in a frigid 25 degrees in January as they did during a sunny 80-degree stroll in summer.

WANT TO BRING YOUR PUP?

No problem! It’s generally safe to bring your dog along for a winter walk, as long as it’s not below freezing outside (that’s 32 degrees Fahrenheit). If it’s rainy or snowy, you may want to consider a waterproof sweater or jacket to keep them warm and dry. Oh, and beware of salt. If sidewalks have recently been salted, those little pebbles can lodge between dog paws and be quite painful. You can slip dog booties on their paws before heading outside to keep your furry friend protected.



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