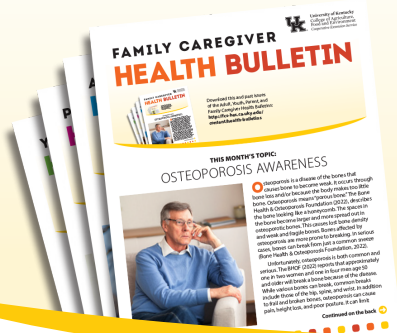


FAMILY CAREGIVER HEALTH BULLETIN



JANUARY 2025

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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL BENEFITS OF COLD WEATHER ACTIVITY



While staying safe in the cold, snow, and ice is a priority, don't let winter keep you from the outdoors if you are able. Both mental and physical health can be negatively affected by the shortened, cold days. It is not uncommon to feel sluggish or less productive. Use winter to your advantage and get invigorated.

Spending time outdoors is essential for well-being and can positively affect mental and physical well-being, including reducing stress and enhancing sleep. Research supports the idea that spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature has positive benefits on health and well-being (White, et al., 2019). Time in nature can include being physically active or just relaxing and taking in the sounds, sights, and smells.

Spending time outdoors during the winter can be a little more challenging, especially as we age, however. As we get older, we lose body heat faster than when we were

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younger, making us more susceptible to cold weather. As a result, it is important to know the risks and benefits of spending time outside.

Dress warm and feel the sunshine.

When you are dressed warmly and can feel the sun on your face, your body is triggered to create vitamin D, which is good for your bones, muscles, immune system, and mood. To get sunshine in the winter, dress appropriately for cold weather and venture out for a picnic on your porch, build a snowman, photograph the snowflakes, walk around the neighborhood if sidewalks are clear of snow and ice, or take a winter hike and soak in the winter birds and other wildlife.

Stay physically active.

Daily physical activity can improve physical and mental well-being. Depending on where you live or visit, winter outdoor activities may include walking, shoveling, snowball fights, and cross-country skiing. Winter exercise needs extra planning and preparation.

- **Talk to a health-care provider about your health and outdoor activity.** Cold temperatures make it more difficult for the heart to pump blood throughout the body which may result in heart strain. Blood vessels can narrow in cold weather and prevent muscles from getting the oxygen they need to function properly. As a result, cold weather can make you vulnerable to muscle strain and injury.
- **Learn the signs of hypothermia.** Hypothermia occurs when the body's temperature loses heat more rapidly than heat is produced. When the body's core temperature drops below 95 degrees, it may cause a medical emergency. According to the Mayo Clinic, some signs of hypothermia include shivering, weak pulse, slurred speech, confusion, low energy, and shallow breathing.
- **Avoid frostnip and frostbite.** Exposure to severe cold and direct contact with ice, cold liquids, and frozen metals can lead to skin and tissue freezing. The early stage of frostbite is called frostnip, which causes cold and numbness. As frostbite gets worse, skin can change color, tingle, sting or feel prickly, throb, and become waxy-looking or hard.

Frostbite can occur on covered or uncovered skin, especially on the fingers, toes, ears, nose, and cheeks. To prevent frostbite, cover your extremities, stay hydrated, recognize the symptoms, and go indoors immediately. If your frostbite is more than mild, the Mayo Clinic recommends seeking medical attention to help prevent permanent damage.

- **Prevent falls.** The chances of falling increase when the ground freezes and becomes icy and slick. The best way to stay safe in icy conditions is to stay inside. If you must go out, take your time, wear proper footwear, use handrails, and walk like a penguin, which means taking smaller waddle-like steps that help maintain your center of gravity.

Be smart!

While going outside in winter can be good for you, watch the weather. If the conditions are too extreme, stay indoors! If you choose to go out on a nice winter day, pick the warmest part of the day to be outside when the sun is at its peak. Dress warmly, avoid cotton, and wear layers made of wool, fleece, or other fabrics that help keep you warm while wicking away moisture. When exercising outdoors, layers allow you to stay comfortable and not overheat. Keep your head and hands and feet covered so you do not lose heat. Wear proper footwear for the conditions. Protect your skin, lips, and eyes. Lastly, stay hydrated.

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