

For Your Health – Warming Up To Cold-Weather Activities

November 6 2023 9:14 AM



ST. LOUIS - Maybe it'll be this week. Maybe next, or the week after. But before long, the weather's going to make its shift to the consistently colder days of fall and winter.

While that change certainly brings a lot to look forward to on the calendar, it can also bring extra challenges when it comes to keeping up with our physical activity.

The result, not surprisingly, is that many of us are less active during the chillier months.

“There is a seasonality to physical activity levels,” said Elizabeth Salerno, a behavioral scientist at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis who specializes in physical activity research. “So, if you feel your activity routine slipping as the weather turns, you’re not alone. And there are ways to maintain movement despite the cold.”

Keeping up our routines, or maybe even building on them, is one of the best things we can do for our health and overall well-being. Activity, even modest amounts, helps lower the risk of conditions like heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer. Exercise also can improve our mobility, quality of life and mental health – something that can be particularly important during gray winter months.

So, what can we do to stay active and ensure that we keep getting these benefits? A mix of strategies can be effective. This can include bigger approaches – like getting a gym membership or buying home exercise gear – and smaller tricks – like walking indoors at shopping malls or shifting exercise times to when it’s daytime and a bit warmer.

“I think it’s important to have an ‘activity menu,’ or a list of exercise options that are suited for different moods, seasons, life phases and the like,” Salerno said. “Whenever you find an activity you enjoy, add it to the menu. This allows us to be flexible and stay active even when Mother Nature doesn’t cooperate.”

Making exercise and activity plans with other people is a great way to build social support and increase the chances that we’ll regularly choose something off our activity menu.

“Having a workout buddy helps provide accountability, enjoyment and encouragement – all of which are important year-round, but especially so when it is cold and dark outside,” Salerno continued.

She offers these tips to help us stay safe and comfortable when our activities take us outside during fall and winter:

- Stay hydrated. This should always be a priority, even in colder weather.
- Wear layers. Lightweight, moisture-wicking layers should be closest to the skin. Outer layers should be insulated and weather-repellent. And don’t forget warm gloves, socks and a hat.
- Choose appropriate footwear. Be sure it has good traction for wintry conditions.
- Plan for the weather. Check the forecast so you’re prepared or can change plans and move inside if necessary.
- Meet up with a workout buddy. On top of making activities more enjoyable, having a partner helps add some peace of mind when working out in colder weather.

As with other routines we work into our days, we eventually find what works best when it comes to activity and exercise.

“Know yourself,” Salerno said. “Find the activities that bring you joy, and you won’t stop at a little cold weather to fit them in.”

Dr. Graham A. Colditz, associate director of prevention and control at Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, is an internationally recognized leader in cancer prevention and the creator of the free prevention tool YourDiseaseRisk.com.