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How to boost your energy levels and feel less tired in winter

The cold and darker months can take their toll on the way we feel. Often, the shorter days, dismal weather and changes to the way we eat and sleep mean we feel groggy and tired in winter – making it difficult to get out of bed. But why can our energy levels drop over winter – and what can we do about it?

Why am I always tired in winter?

Disrupted sleep cycles

There are several reasons we might feel more tired in winter. Firstly, as the days become shorter, our sleep and waking cycles may become disrupted and we may experience hormonal changes as a result.

Reema Patel, a registered dietitian at [DietitianFit](#), says changes in the level of the hormone melatonin – which helps to regulate how awake or sleepy we feel – may be to blame.

"When it is dark, we produce more melatonin, which gives us feelings of tiredness," she explains. "So in the winter when it is darker, we may produce more melatonin, which can impact on our mood and leave us feeling more fatigued and tired compared to the summer months."

Lack of vitamin D

A [vitamin D deficiency](#) can also make us feel tired (fatigued). The body creates vitamin D from direct sunlight on the skin when outdoors, which is far easier in the summer when the days are longer and we spend more time outside.

But between October and early March in the UK, we don't make much vitamin D from the sun - and our supplies become depleted over the course of the winter.

Change in diet

Additionally, our diet may also change during the colder months. In winter, we tend to reach for [comforting foods](#) that aren't always healthy - and can make us feel more tired and sluggish. Research suggests that we may be more likely to turn to comfort foods in winter because they release mood-enhancing neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine. When it's cold and dark outside, these foods can give us a temporary boost¹.

[Physical activity](#) can make us feel energised and help us to sleep better, but it can be difficult to feel motivated to exercise in the winter.

So, how can I boost my energy in winter?

Let some daylight in

"Ways to help reduce the influence of melatonin can be to open the curtains in the morning to allow sunlight through to the room," says Patel. "It also helps to try to get out for a short walk in the morning or early afternoon to get in some light where possible."

If you [work from home](#) or in an office, it can help to get outdoors in natural daylight as much as possible or work near a window.

Exercise regularly

It's also important to keep moving and exercise regularly. The exercise-induced release of 'feelgood' chemicals called endorphins will give you a boost, reduce [stress](#) and help you sleep better at night.

"Generally our exercise levels can reduce in the colder seasons - you might notice yourself not going out for that lunchtime walk any more as it is too cold or raining. These small things can make a difference, as they can often give us a boost of energy, especially when we spend some time outdoors in the fresh air," says Patel.

"Maybe going to the gym doesn't appeal to you, so you notice yourself becoming more sedentary in the colder months. This can actually leave us feeling lower in energy in the long term. Trying to look for home workouts or keeping active in other ways that you enjoy can be helpful for energy levels and overall mood."

Eat the right foods

To help with overall energy levels, it's important to aim to eat a variety of wholegrain carbohydrates, proteins and plenty of vegetables. "Many people find it easier to eat a larger range of fruits, vegetables and salads during the summer months, but can struggle with these during the colder season," Patel says.

It can help to be more inventive with the ways you add vegetables and salads into your meals, she advises.

"Perhaps a warm mixed leaf salad of chickpeas with halloumi, sun-dried tomatoes, capers and a balsamic dressing? Or try a bowl of homemade mixed vegetable soup with brown pasta or lentils to boost energy levels," says Patel. "A chilli con carne with some brown rice can be a comforting and balanced meal too."

Avoid too much added sugar

Food products that contain added sugars can cause a rapid increase in our blood sugar levels and lead to a crash later on, which can cause energy dips. So too can refined carbohydrates such as white pasta or white bread, cakes and pastries.

"Wholegrains such as brown rice or pasta, wild rice, wholemeal bread, quinoa, buckwheat and freekah can help keep our blood sugar levels more stable, providing a more steady release of energy throughout the day," says Patel.

It's normal to crave comforting foods in the cold and darker months, but [keeping them healthy](#) can prevent us from feeling too tired in winter.

"Sometimes these comforting meals can leave us feeling a bit more sluggish if they are not well balanced," she adds. "It may be worth thinking of ways to make some of these comforting meals a bit more nourishing, both in a nutritional and taste aspect, to leave you feeling energetic and prevent [energy slumps](#)."

Try a vitamin D supplement

It is also recommended that everyone take a daily [vitamin D supplement](#) during the winter months. "This is because sunlight is the best source of vitamin D as opposed to food sources. 10 micrograms (400 IU) per day of vitamin D3 is generally advised – please speak to your GP before supplementing," says Patel.

Work on your sleep hygiene

If you have difficulty falling asleep, trying to stick to a [regular bedtime routine](#) may help you switch off and prepare for bed. Keeping to – roughly – the same sleeping hours, having a warm bath before bed and reading a book or listening to a podcast can help you wind down. Try to avoid screens and don't exercise vigorously before trying to sleep, as this will make you feel more awake.

Visit your doctor

Sometimes, feeling tired all the time can be a sign of a medical problem. If you are constantly exhausted and it is having a negative impact on your life, it's important to speak to your doctor.

Sometimes a lack of energy and enthusiasm may be due to [seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#), a type of depression that occurs during the darker winter months. In the UK, around 3 people in every 100 have significant winter [depression](#).

Persistent tiredness may also be linked to a condition such as [anaemia](#), an [underactive thyroid gland](#) or [type 2 diabetes](#).

Your doctor will be able to investigate to see if there is an underlying health problem causing your persistent tiredness.

Further reading

1. [Singh: Mood, food, and obesity.](#)

2. Royal College of Psychiatrists: Seasonal Affective Disorder.

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