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How to protect your heart during the winter

The cold, dark winter months can pose health risks to many people, but we tend to focus on the dangers of flu and hypothermia. However, the drop in temperature can impact your health, specifically your heart, in ways you might not expect.

Why can winter affect your heart?

[Evidence](#) shows that across the winter months, the risk of having a [heart attack](#) or [stroke](#) increases. Those who are most at risk include adults aged over 65 years, people with long-term health conditions, people who are [overweight](#) or obese and people who live less healthy lifestyles.

People who have previously had a [heart attack](#) are also at a higher risk if they contract [flu](#), which is also more likely in [winter](#).

"As well as higher rates of flu in the colder months, there are other factors that contribute to the rise in winter heart attacks," says Dr Helen Flaherty, head of health promotion and education at [Heart Research UK](#).

"As temperatures drop, your blood vessels contract and your heart needs to work harder to keep you warm, leading to increased heart rate and [blood pressure](#). Cold temperatures can lead to changes in the formation of blood, making the risk of blood clots more likely, which can lead to a [heart attack](#) or [stroke](#)."

The [winter](#) months can also trigger lifestyle changes, such as a decrease in physical activity, a less healthy diet, increased alcohol intake and [smoking](#), particularly around the festive period. Increased emotional [stress](#) during the festive period is also believed to impact on the rise in rates of heart attack, Flaherty adds.

What can you do to keep your heart healthy in winter?

Heat your home appropriately

"You can reduce the impact of cold weather by keeping your home heated to 18°C or higher and by wrapping up well when you head [outdoors](#)," says Flaherty. When it's very cold, snowy or icy, it may be better to stay indoors as much as you can.

"When you're indoors, wear warm socks and slippers to keep your feet cosy. You could also wrap up in a blanket or use a hot water bottle or an electric blanket," adds Ruth McNiven, senior cardiac nurse at the [British Heart Foundation](#).

Wrap up when outside

It's also important to wrap up in warm layers of clothing when going outside in the cold.

"Wearing a few thin layers can help keep you warmer than one thick layer. Wearing a hat, scarf and gloves will help to maintain your core heat," says McNiven.

"If you have [angina](#) you could wear a scarf wrapped loosely around your mouth and nose or wear a face mask, so you breathe in warmer air. This may help to improve any symptoms you might get in colder [weather](#), but if they persist or worsen, contact your GP or call 999."

Stay active

Exercising can help prevent [weight gain](#), which can put strain on your body, heart and immune system and may make it less effective at fighting infections. It also puts you at increased risk of complications if you catch the [flu](#) or [COVID-19](#).

"Feeling motivated to stay active during the cold, dark [winter](#) months can be challenging, particularly if you tend to exercise outdoors. You might want to look at indoor activities, such as badminton, dancing, [yoga](#), gym classes or online [exercise](#) classes at home," says Flaherty.

Regular exercise, whether that's indoors or outdoors, is important for keeping your heart healthy. "It can help to reduce [high blood pressure](#), and lower the risk of having a heart attack or [stroke](#). However, if you have a heart condition or are elderly, you might want to stay active indoors during the colder months," says McNiven.

"There are plenty of activities you can do indoors, from circuit training to chair-based strength exercises - aim to work muscles all over the body."

Get the flu vaccine

"Getting your [flu jab](#) is vital if you are older or have a heart and circulatory condition," says McNiven. "It helps to reduce your chances of catching flu, which can exacerbate conditions such as coronary heart disease and [heart failure](#)."

The [flu jab](#) is being offered on the NHS to those aged 50 and over, people with certain health conditions, [pregnant](#) people, people in long-stay residential care and those receiving a carer's allowance or who are main carers for older or disabled people. The NHS vaccine is also being offered to people living with those with compromised [immune systems](#) and frontline health or social care workers.

If you're not eligible, you can choose to pay for the [jab](#) or check if your employer may be offering it.

Eat well

It's important to have regular hot [meals](#) and drinks to give your body the energy it needs to keep you warm. During winter, it can be tempting to binge on less healthy [comfort foods](#), but hearty meals can be good for you too.

"Plan your meals in advance and try to include lots of fruit and vegetables, oats and wholegrain foods, oily fish, unsalted nuts, seeds, beans, low-fat dairy products and lean meats or vegetarian or vegan alternatives," says Flaherty.

Be careful with alcohol

It can be easy to overindulge in [alcohol](#) during the [festive period](#). However, drinking too much can increase your risk of high blood pressure and coronary heart disease.

"Keep an eye on your [alcohol](#) intake and try to stick to the guidelines of no more than 14 units spread over three or more days each week," says Flaherty. "Look for drinks with a lower alcohol content, or alcohol-free alternatives, such as reduced-calorie soft drinks or mocktails and herbal teas." Women who are pregnant should avoid alcohol altogether if possible.

If you are a smoker, or occasional smoker, you may find that you [smoke](#) more during the festive period. "Smoking can damage your [heart](#) and blood vessels, which increases your risk of having a [heart attack](#). Quitting smoking can be difficult, but it is an important step for reducing your risk of heart disease," Flaherty adds. "Quitting [smoking](#) requires a huge amount of willpower, and getting support from your doctor, friends, family or local support group can really help."

Rest if you become unwell

"If you feel like you're developing a [cough](#) or [cold](#), try to rest and drink plenty of fluids," says McNiven. "If you already have a heart condition, it's important that you get advice from your [pharmacist](#) before taking over-the-counter remedies as some may not be safe to take with your regular medication."

If you are 65 or over, or in one of the other at-risk groups, it's important to get medical help from your GP, pharmacy or NHS 111 as soon as you feel unwell.

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