

Beat winter weight gain

By Robin Vitetta-Miller, M.S.

Are you afraid of getting plumper as the days get shorter? You're not alone. Many of us gain a pound per winter with 75 percent of the gain occurring between mid-November and mid-January. While a pound might not sound like a lot, those who gain during the coldest months typically keep the extra weight on and add more over time. In other words, what seems small could be the start of some serious weight problems.

Researchers blame several factors, beginning with the weather. Shorter days and longer nights induce feelings of depression, fatigue and cravings for sweets and starches, while cold and/or stormy weather makes it difficult to exercise outdoors. Even braving the elements to drive to the gym can seem like too much effort some days. Add two months of nearly nonstop high-calorie party fare, and it's no wonder so many of us greet spring with a spare tire around our middle.

Why not make this the winter you outwit the forces that conspire against you from inclement weather to Aunt Bertha's buttery holiday cookies? It's not difficult; experts agree that a three-pronged approach is your best bet: Resist the instinct to overeat and "store up" for winter, get plenty of natural sunlight, and exercise regularly (cardio as well as strength training) to stay fit and keep your metabolism revved. By following this simple plan, you'll emerge from winter's hibernation with a body that's ready for bikini season.

1. Plan to eat right.

If you tend to eat like a bear as winter approaches, you really can blame it on Mother Nature. "Even with modern conveniences like heat and grocery stores, humans still follow their animal instincts to beef up for winter," says Katherine Tallmadge, M.A., R.D., author of *Diet Simple: 154 Mental Tricks, Substitutions, Habits & Inspirations* (LifeLine Press, 2002). Here are three tips to help you plan ahead to eat healthfully all winter and avoid packing on the pounds:

Get a little more protein. One of the easiest, and best, ways to curb carb cravings in winter is to increase your protein intake, says Susan Kleiner, Ph.D., R.D., author of *Power Eating* (Human Kinetics, 2nd edition, 2001). "Dietary protein helps control appetite, which ultimately keeps weight in check," she explains. But how much more protein should you eat? A moderately active 145-pound woman should get about 20 extra grams of protein daily in winter, or go from a typical 79 grams to 99 grams, says Kleiner.

To calculate your usual, nonwinter protein needs, multiply your weight by 0.55 gram (example: 145 pounds X 0.55 gram = 79 grams). To determine how much protein you should eat in colder months, just add 20 grams or multiply your weight by 0.68 gram (example: 145 pounds X 0.68 gram = 99 grams).

Head off cravings for simple carbs by stocking up on healthier foods. Simple and refined carbs (sugar, soda and sugary foods like cookies and candy) provide few nutrients, and most are paired with foods high in fat, sugar and sodium. Such "empty-calorie" foods don't satisfy cravings for very long, so stock your refrigerator and cupboards with nourishing options that are high in complex carbs, says Tallmadge. These include fresh fruits and vegetables, dried fruits, whole-grain breads and cereals and healthful, low-sodium soups. Because these foods all of which are high in fiber are utilized by the body more slowly, you stay full and feel satisfied longer. Some delicious lowfat, high-fiber options include oatmeal with raisins or other dried fruit, lowfat granola with nonfat milk, whole-grain bread with reduced-fat peanut butter, low-sodium lentil or bean soup, and brown rice cooked with black beans and seasoned with cumin.

Eat more soup to stay full longer. In a 1999 study at Penn State University in University Park, Pa., subjects who ate soup before lunch consumed 100 fewer calories at that meal and they didn't make up for those calories by eating more later. Researchers are not sure why, but one possible conclusion is that when water is incorporated into food (as opposed to drinking it straight), your stomach empties more slowly and keeps you feeling full longer on fewer calories. "We tend to crave warm comfort foods like soup in winter," says Kleiner. "Eating more soup when temperatures drop is a natural and healthy way to stay full and avoid overeating."

2. See the light.

Too little sunlight can trigger cravings for high-calorie, fatty carbs like cakes, cookies, ice cream and chips, says Kleiner. "This is because diminished sunlight in winter reduces the brain's production of serotonin, the mood-boosting brain chemical that helps suppress food cravings and overeating," she explains. "Because we don't get as much sun exposure in the winter, our serotonin levels tend to plunge, and cravings kick in to combat the blues."

Raymond W. Lam, M.D., a professor and head of the division of clinical neuroscience in the department of psychiatry at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, says being exposed to an hour of indirect outdoor light daily can help ward off the winter blues.

"Bundle up and exercise outdoors and you'll come back feeling refreshed, and it may help control your appetite," says Tallmadge. "If you can't get out during the week, take a longer hike on the weekend, or go cycling or enjoy snow sports like snowshoeing or skiing."

If you work in a windowless office, take a brisk walk at lunchtime, remembering to wear sunscreen and a hat with a visor even if it's cloudy to protect against UV rays. To increase your exposure to full-spectrum sunlight when you're at home, open the curtains, trim tree branches that block out light and consider putting in a skylight, experts suggest.

While nearly everyone (except those who live in year-round sunny climes) has some degree of the winter blahs, those who experience mild to severe depression all winter may have seasonal affective disorder (SAD). About 10 million people suffer from the condition due to the decrease in daylight hours in winter. If you suspect you have SAD, see a physician as you may require professional help; you'll also want to make sure another condition is not causing the symptoms, Lam says. Typically, treatment for SAD includes specialized light therapy sitting for 30 minutes a day under fluorescent lamps that are 1020 times brighter than ordinary indoor light. "For people with SAD, [prescribed light therapy] can greatly help mood and appetite disturbances in winter," Lam says.

3. Move it or gain it.

"Exercise is crucial to avoid weight gain in winter," says Robert H. Eckel, M.D., a professor of medicine at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver and chairperson of the American Heart Association Council on Nutrition, Physical Activity and Metabolism. "Many people exercise less during the winter months and wind up gaining weight because they eat more calories than they burn off," he says. Adds Tallmadge: "In the winter we also lose subtle outdoor calorie-burning activities like short walks and gardening. Although these may burn just 100 calories per day, that can translate into a 3- to 4-pound weight gain over the course of a winter."

Strength training is essential for maintaining a revved metabolism when temperatures drop, says Wayne L. Westcott, Ph.D., senior fitness/research director at the South Shore YMCA in Quincy, Mass., and co-author with Lisa LaRosa Loud of *No More Cellulite* (Perigee, 2003). "Weight training is the best way to recharge your metabolism, so aim for at least 20 minutes two to three days a week," he says. "Most people will get results long before it's time to put on summer clothes. Strength training gives you the most benefit in the least amount of time."

And it's crucial for weight loss: "If you don't lift, you don't lose," says Pamela M. Peeke, M.D., M.P.H., author of *Fat Fight After Forty* (Viking, 2001) and assistant professor of medicine at the University of Maryland Medical School in Baltimore. "Add cardio on your nonlift days and you'll keep the fat burning going all week!"

Westcott advises working up a sweat with cardio for a minimum of 20 minutes at least three times a week.

Staying active in winter has a fringe benefit: Like sunlight, it elevates your mood and reduces stress, which in turn helps you avoid overeating to alleviate winter depression, says Peeke. "All those mood-enhancing endorphins released during exercise aren't likely to happen when you just sit on your rump all winter long," she adds.

"What we can predict, we can control," says John Foreyt, Ph.D., director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "We know winter is a high-risk time for weight gain, so we must create and follow strategies to minimize eating and maximize opportunities for exercise."

These three strategies, along with the delicious recipes (see "Related Stories" below) all hearty and satisfying favorites made healthy will help to ensure you don't gain a single pound this winter.