

Kalamunda Physiotherapy Centre

Beating the winter blues

The Winter Blues is actually more common than you might think and anyone can experience a bout of it from year to year. There will be fluctuations in your eating patterns (eating more with cravings for carbohydrates), more sleep required than usual, some weight gain, fatigue and a general sluggishness accompanied by a decrease in motivation or interest. While some people manage these fluctuations with relatively minimal disruption to their daily routines, a few other people's Winter Blues symptoms may extend to a more intense group of symptoms known as Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD, a type of depression.

Exercise helps depression quickly

One study showed that the improvement in mood begins just ten minutes after you start exercising. It was found that mood continues to get better for up to twenty minutes. Another found that depression had improved after people had walked on a treadmill for thirty minutes a day for only ten days. (Antidepressants usually take at least two to three weeks to begin improving mood.) And more lasting change in mood was found to have occurred after people had exercised for just two to three weeks.

Almost anyone can benefit

Exercise works with children, young adults, and older people. The research shows that people who begin regular exercise find many benefits: their mood is improved; they are less negative, less angry, less tired, and less anxious. People with depression who take regular exercise may find that the world begins to look a whole lot better. So the really good news is...if you are depressed, exercise can help you feel better quickly and the results last.

How to take action

Your physiotherapist is an expert who can help you plan an exercise program that will suit your overall health and physical needs, and which may help your depression. And best of all, your physio can help with the motivation you need not only to get started, but to keep going with the exercise plan. If you have been depressed for some time you may not be very fit and should be careful not to overdo it. Your exercise program should be monitored, assessed and graded regularly. Your physio will help keep you on track, and help you beat the blues.

Even a small amount of exercise helps. Talk to your physio; talk about your problem, your wish to exercise, and especially tell the physio about any medications you may be taking. Your physio will help you decide whether you need to check with your doctor before starting an exercise program. Once you have been cleared medically, decide with your physio which type of exercise you want to do. You may even want to pick several forms of exercise so that you can vary your routine. Also, having someone else exercise with you can make it fun, provide support, and help you stick to the exercise plan. (If you are close to someone with depression, one of the most helpful things you could do is to be there to assist with motivation when that person begins to exercise.)

You will feel the benefit of regular exercise very soon and be glad that you chose to walk (or run, or ride, or swim) away from depression!



Tips for beating the winter blues include:

- Ensure you get *at least one hour of outdoor light* each day, preferably in the morning.
- Spend time with friends and family; *keep up your social life*. A decrease in social activities during winter can have an impact on a person's mood and energy levels.
- **Exercise!** Make sure you keep well and active by continuing activities such as exercise. While more difficult to undertake in winter, it can help lift depressive symptoms.
- Learn something new. **Start a hobby**. Developing an interest in something new will make you feel good during those long winter months.

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Winter sports and cold-related injuries

Winter enthusiasts look forward to this time of year when there's an abundance of winter activities to enjoy, like skiing, snowboarding, skating, hockey and many other active pursuits. Before heading out to the ice, snow, trails or slopes, you need to remember that winter activities often pose a higher risk of injury if time isn't taken in advance for proper body conditioning.

Exercising in cold weather places extra demands on the body. For example, a drop in core body temperature of just 1°C causes the muscles to shiver, which in turn can lead to low blood sugar levels (hypoglycaemia) and reduced sporting performance. Most cold-related injuries can be prevented with planning, adequate preparation and proper equipment.

Among the most common winter sports injuries are knee sprains, torn ligaments, pulled muscles and wrist fractures. These aren't seen only in the usually inactive who have become over-enthusiastic with the first snow fall. Even those who have been active throughout the summer can fall prey to the injuries of winter sports, mainly because the body's muscles need different conditioning for the flexibility and balance demanded by most winter activities. More than any other group of winter enthusiasts, skiers and snowboarders seem the most susceptible to injuries including strains, sprains and fractures.

Prepare for winter sport

The physiotherapists in this practice suggest:

- If you haven't exercised regularly in months, don't expect your body to perform sporting miracles during a weekend on the ski slopes. The best way to avoid many sports-related injuries in winter is to maintain an adequate fitness level all year round.
- Condition the muscles particular to your chosen winter sport for a few weeks or months beforehand. For example, downhill skiing places great demands on the quadriceps, so condition these muscles with regular pre-season training sessions of step aerobics or stair climbing.
- Acclimatise yourself to exercising in colder weather.
- Cold muscles, tendons and ligaments are vulnerable to injury. Warm up and stretch thoroughly before playing your chosen winter sport.
- Remember to take cold temperatures into account and spend more time warming up than usual.
- Make sure you cool down thoroughly afterwards. Include plenty of slow, sustained stretching.

Come home from the snow without the aches and pains! Consult your physiotherapist today about preparing your body for winter sports.

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