

Yes, winter weather can make you miserable—but not in the ways you might think.



Outsmart the Season

Shake off these winter health myths and focus on what *should* give you shivers

BY LAURA ROBERSON • ILLUSTRATIONS BY ISTVAN BANYAI

WINTER CAN BE A PAIN. AT ITS MILDEST, THE chilly weather strains your lungs during your morning run. At its worst, it wields an icy grip on your arteries. “Cold air constricts your blood vessels,” says John Eleftheriades, M.D., chief of cardiac surgery at Yale Medical Group. “This helps keep your body warm—bloodflow just beneath the skin diminishes, so less heat escapes.” But it also causes blood-pressure spikes, which can stress arteries and heart muscle. So it’s no surprise that deaths from heart attack, heart disease, and stroke peak from December through March.

But the subzero season’s frosty reception isn’t entirely weather-related—or deserved. These seven myths about the health perils of winter rank up there with the abominable snowman. So our experts will help you stop worrying about stuff that doesn’t really matter so you can focus on things that do—all to keep you and yours healthy through the season. Now hit the slopes!

Wicked winter health myth #1

Allergies hibernate in the cold

You waved off ragweed in the fall, so you’re done wheezing for the next few months, right? Maybe not. “People tend to focus on pollen and hay fever as the limit of their allergy risks,”

says John Santilli, M.D., an allergist and immunologist in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Mold and dust-mite allergies in the fall and winter are more common than you’d think.

Start with that fresh evergreen you haul into your living room every December. Mold spores can cling to the tree and multiply indoors. In a 2007 study, Dr. Santilli set up a real Christmas tree in a home and found that mold counts increased fivefold after 2 weeks. “It’s like bringing a pile of leaves into the house,” he says. “Even if you aren’t allergic, the mold could still cause irritation, leading to upper respiratory or sinus infections.” Decorations stored in a damp basement or attic are also sources of mold and dust mites. The fact that you close up your house in cold weather doesn’t help either. “Closing windows and turning up the heat recirculates air and raises dust that had been collecting all spring and summer,” says University of Arizona pulmonologist Paul Enright, M.D.

Your new strategy: Shake out the bad stuff.

If only a live tree will do, chop one down at a local Christmas tree farm. “Decay doesn’t start until a week after the tree is cut down,” says Dr. Santilli. Ask the farmer if he has a tree shaker, which can help free any mold spores, loose

pine needles, or lingering pollen. You can also blast your greenery with a leaf blower at home. Before bringing it inside, wipe off the tree’s trunk with a 20-to-1 water-to-bleach solution to kill any mold, the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America recommends. After the holidays, pack decorations in airtight plastic tubs to block out mold and dust mites. (Cardboard encourages mold growth.) Finally, install a HEPA filter in your HVAC system. These can remove up to 99 percent of dust and other particles, Dr. Santilli says.

Wicked winter health myth #2

Suicides peak over the holidays

The onslaught of stressors—financial strain, dinner with the in-laws, harsh weather—would seem to be a perfect storm for suicide. “People mistakenly connect the notion of the holiday blues with people killing themselves,” says David Rudd, Ph.D., dean of the college of social

Live Christmas tree?
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and behavioral science at the University of Utah. The reality is that suicides drop to a yearly low in December and peak in spring and summer, according to a 2008 study in the journal *Psychiatry Research*. “Social cohesion reduces risk of suicide—even if you’re packed into a room with relatives you hate,” Rudd says. “It makes it harder to deny the impact of your death, and offers the hope of help.”

But the holiday season is not without risk. British researchers found that rates of deliberate self-harm jump on New Year’s Day, and the *Psychiatry Research* study shows that rates of suicide among men begin to rise in January from their December lows. “That sense of support from the holidays evaporates,” Rudd says. “Suicidal people may expect the holidays to resolve their depression. If that doesn’t happen, they can end up feeling even worse.”

Your new strategy: Manageable resolutions.

Instead of setting yearlong goals, shoot for a good month or even a week—and start now, not January first. “Long-term goals facilitate procrastination, which can lead to hopelessness,” says Rudd. “Work in an incremental fashion so you feel accomplished.” If your goal is to lose weight, resolve to join a winter rec league. Exercise can ward off depression, plus you’ll maintain social connections, he says.

Wicked winter health myth #3

Going outside with wet hair will give you a cold

Wet hair, icy temperatures, and exposed heads don’t cause colds—viruses do. “Rhinovirus actually survives better from late spring through early fall, when humidity is high,” says

Jack Gwaltney Jr., M.D., a professor emeritus at the University of Virginia medical school and founder of commoncold.org. “But in the mild weather, we aren’t crowded together indoors, making exposure less likely.”

Your new strategy: Don’t blow it. Alcohol-based hand sanitizer kills the rhinovirus more effectively than hand washing—but probably still won’t slash your risk of catching a cold, according to recent University of Virginia research. “Hand transfer may not play as significant a role in the spread of rhinovirus as we thought,” says study author Ronald Turner, M.D. “Conversely, airborne transfer may be more important than previously recognized.”

While there’s no proven way to stop the snotty virus, you can control the symptoms. If you’re already infected, don’t forcibly drain your schnozz—it could make matters worse. According to Dr. Gwaltney’s research, the pressure of nose-blowing propels germ-laden mucus into your sinuses, potentially causing inflammation and secondary infection. Pinching your nose while sneezing could have the same effect. Cough or sneeze with nostrils open into a tissue (this also reduces droplet spread), and fight runny nose with an antihistamine, such as Dimetapp or Chlor-Trimeton, he says.

Wicked winter health myth #4

Poinsettias can kill kids and pets

This gem is perhaps one of modern history’s earliest urban legends. In 1919, the toddler son of an army officer based in Hawaii was found dead. The unconfirmed cause: eating poinsettia leaves. This diagnosis later appeared in the



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1944 book *Poisonous Plants of Hawaii*, and the toxic claims went viral. Poison centers still receive thousands of calls about poinsettia exposures every year, but there has never been a single confirmed death. “Exposure to a little poinsettia sap from a leaf or two shouldn’t cause any problems,” says Edward Krenzelok, Pharm.D., director of the Pittsburgh Poison Center and author of a 1996 study that reviewed more than 22,000 cases of poinsettia exposure. “If a child or pet eats an entire plant, the sap may cause some vomiting or diarrhea.” More realistic worst-case scenario: a sour taste in your leaf-eater’s mouth. The fix: a glass of milk—or a dog biscuit.

Your new strategy: Keep Christmas lilies out.

Christmas lilies can actually kill your cat, according to a 2006 *Journal of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care* study review. Eating even small amounts can lead to severe kidney damage—or failure—in felines, the scientists say. Signs of illness, such as vomiting, lethargy, and inability to urinate, usually develop within 12 hours, and may progress to kidney failure in 2 to 3 days.

Wicked winter health myth #5

If you’re falling on the slopes, go limp

You don’t feel as much pain from a fall while stumbling around drunk, so shouldn’t the same principle apply if you do the rag-doll bit during a ski tumble? No. It’s the alcohol, not your body posture, masking the pain of your fall. In reality, the muscles of your arms, legs, and trunk need to tighten during a fall to protect your bones and joints. “If you relax, then the ligaments around your joints are not assisted by muscles,” says Robert Johnson, M.D., a professor emeritus of orthopedics at the University of Vermont. “This puts the ligaments and bones at risk of injury.” Stiff muscles help absorb the shock of an impact, taking weight off weaker structures, according to a 2003 University of Michigan study.

Your new strategy: Brace yourself. Assume the semisquat of a parachutist who’s just about to land. Moderately flex every joint in your body, keep your feet together, lower your chin, and

The spoilage spectrum

That leftover-turkey sandwich may come with a side of stomach pain. “A packed refrigerator can’t effectively circulate air around the food,” says Barbara Ingham, Ph.D., a professor of food science at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. That means bad bacteria can multiply, often without altering the taste, smell, or appearance of your food. Chill leftovers within 2 hours, avoid overstuffing your fridge, and clear cold space by the clock.

CASSEROLE 4 days in the fridge, 3 months frozen

“Each ingredient has unique bacterial parameters,” Ingham says. Plus, the dense mass takes a while to cool off, so it stays in the danger zone (40° to 140°F) longer.

HOMEMADE EGGNOG 3 days in the fridge

Raw and partially cooked eggs are notorious carriers of salmonella. When preparing, heat it to 160°F to wipe out the tough guys. Store-bought nog is typically pasteurized, so it probably won’t harbor salmonella.

TURKEY 3 days in the fridge, 4 months frozen

“The bird’s internal cavity functions as an insulator, increasing risk,” says Ingham. “It doesn’t heat and cool as quickly as other meats.” Cut the meat from the carcass and store it in shallow containers to speed cooling.

PUMPKIN PIE 4 days in the fridge, 2 months frozen

Although pumpkin pie is cooked, it’s still goeey—and germs love moisture. Add to that the amount of time the

pie spent on the counter at room temperature, and it can be a formula for bacterial multiplication, says Ingham.

STUFFING 4 days in the fridge

Stuffed turkey cooks from the outside in, so the fluffy stuff has hours to soak up juices—and potentially salmonella—from raw meat. Reheat refrigerated stuffing to an internal temperature of at least 165°F before eating.

SLICED HAM 3 months in the fridge or freezer

Commercially cured and cooked country ham can pack up to 764 milligrams of sodium per ounce—more than 100 times the amount in some turkey breasts, and enough to ward off spoilage.

FRUITCAKE 6 months in the fridge, 1 year frozen

The source of commercial fruitcake’s longevity: candied fruit. “Fruitcake seems moist, but from a microbial standpoint it’s quite dry,” says Ingham. Sugar on the fruit creates water molecules too big for bacteria to live on.

keep your arms up and forward, says Carl Ettlinger, M.S., an adjunct professor of orthopedics at the University of Vermont and president of Vermont Ski Safety Equipment. “This puts you in a position to protect your head and helps you avoid landing on your hands,” he says. Always resist the urge to fully straighten your legs. A locked knee turns your leg into a snappable toothpick.

Wicked winter health myth #6

A roaring fire will keep you warm

This is true—as long as you’re sitting about 2 feet from the blaze. The rest of your house may as well be an ice hotel. That’s because an open-hearth fireplace acts as a vacuum. “It will actually cool the house by drawing warm air out through the chimney,” says Kirk Smith, Ph.D., a professor of global environmental health at the University of California at Berkeley.

What *isn’t* sucked entirely outside: wood smoke, which contains chemicals similar to those found in cigarettes. Smoke particles are small enough to penetrate deep into the lungs, potentially causing infection. “There are little macrophages, a type of white blood cell, in the tiny air sacs in your lungs. They’re designed to grab bacteria,” Smith says. “They are damaged by wood smoke, so they don’t operate as well.” Smoke particles may also infiltrate the bloodstream and cause heart disease, he says. A 2008 study found that air levels of benzo(a)pyrene—a potential human carcinogen—were four times higher in homes after a wood fire had blazed for an average of 8 hours.

Your new strategy: A controlled burn. Choose hardwoods, such as ash and beech, which emit lower levels of damaging particles than softwoods do. And use glass fireplace doors. These radiate heat into your home, eliminate the vacuum effect, and shield you from smoke, Smith says. Another option is synthetic logs made from wax and compressed sawdust or even coffee grounds, which are more combustible than cordwood. In fact, a 2006 Canadian study found that Java-Log Firelogs (pinemountainbrands.com) released lower amounts of volatile organic compounds than other wax logs.

Wicked winter health myth #7

Turkey makes you sleepy

Everyone scarfs down turkey dinner, and 2 hours later the entire crew is asleep on couches and recliners. Classic. But while the culprit is indeed tryptophan, an amino acid found in turkey that spikes sleep-inducing serotonin levels in your brain, there’s nothing special about the tryptophan buried in your holiday bird, says W. Christopher Winter, M.D., medical director of the sleep medicine center at Martha Jefferson Hospital in Charlottesville, Virginia. Per gram, turkey packs the same amount of the drowse-inducing stuff as chicken, and just slightly more than pork or cheese. “The real culprit is the huge carbohydrate load that you eat along with it—potatoes, dressing, rolls—which *activates* tryptophan,” Dr. Winter says.

Carbohydrates trigger the release of insulin, a hormone that clears sugars and amino acids (other than tryptophan) from your bloodstream. This elevates the tryptophan concentration in your blood, so even the relatively small dose from turkey can make you sleepy. Also at play: the size of your spread. “When you eat a massive meal, your body redirects its resources to your gut—and away from your brain,” Dr. Winter explains. “This can also be sleep promoting.”

Your new strategy: A protein infusion. If you hope to make it past halftime, skip the traditional sides in favor of protein-rich dishes. Have beans instead of sweet potatoes, for example, or deviled eggs instead of yeasty rolls. This fills you up faster, and also wakes up your brain. Protein breaks down into amino acids—tryptophan included. But without the carb-induced insulin surge, the tryptophan is masked by tyrosine, an amino acid three times more concentrated in turkey than tryptophan is. In your brain, tyrosine is turned into dopamine, a chemical that makes you feel alert. ■