

Keep Winter Blues at Bay

This past weekend we turned back the clocks, and this annual “fall back” ritual affects people in vastly different ways. If you’re one of the lucky ones, you feel fine and enjoy the longer evenings by the fire. But for those who are less fortunate, winter blues can set in with a vengeance bringing about irritability, carbohydrate cravings, trouble sleeping, and a host of other problems.

The good news is that you don’t have to suffer—and you *shouldn’t*. Here are five surefire ways to feel just as good in the dark days of February as you do on a bright spring day.

1. **Go Outside:** Light has a drastic effect on mood and the best way to increase your light exposure is to get out for half an hour in the middle of the day. I know what you’re thinking: “Easy for you to say, living in Southern California where the thermometer rarely drops below 50 degrees.” I recognize that bad weather can make getting outside impossible at times, but give it your best shot whenever you can. Even when it’s cold, sunlight can have a dramatic impact on your mood and overall health.
2. **Bring Mood-Boosting Sunshine Indoors:** Light boxes, which provide full-spectrum light indoors—mimicking the mood-boosting effects of sunshine—are a remarkable advancement. Just 30 minutes in front of a “sunshine” box in the morning, while you eat breakfast or read the paper, can make a remarkable difference in how you feel.
3. **Keep Moving to Release Tension and Get the Endorphins Flowing:** Even something as simple as a 20-minute brisk walk can relieve tension in your muscles, boost your body’s production of feel-good endorphins, and help you sleep better at night.
4. **Eat Your Way to a Better Mood:** To keep your emotions on an even keel, eat foods that provide a sustained release of energy, such as high fiber vegetables and fruits. Lean protein from fish, skinless poultry, nonfat or low-fat yogurt, and beans and legumes promote satiety and will provide the stamina you need to function at your best.
5. **Increase Your Intake of Vitamin D:** Your body’s synthesis of vitamin D is dependent on adequate sunlight exposure, which is why it makes sense that many of us don’t make enough of this vital nutrient during the winter. While vitamin D is best-known for its role in healthy bones, recent studies show it also plays an important role in regulating mood. Aim for at least 2,000 IU per day during the darker months.

As you can see, you don’t have to fall victim to the winter blues. Just get a little sunshine, beef up on exercise, keep an eye on your diet, and increase your vitamin D intake. Good moods are sure to follow.

To your health,

Julian Whitaker, MD