



Staying healthy while enjoying cold weather

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Commonsense precautions when it comes to winter

Most Americans prefer warmer weather, according to a Pew Research Center study, but cold weather does have its delights and advantages. Studies show that people are able to focus and think more clearly in cold weather, since cold exposure stimulates hormones that boost mental clarity. And there are few moments more comforting than sitting in front of a roaring fire with a book and a steaming cup of tea. If you're a person with diabetes living in a colder climate, here are ways to ensure that you'll enjoy your winter season safely.

Manage your diabetes even more carefully

It's important at any time to keep on top of your blood glucose levels and diabetes medication, but in cold weather it is even more so. Blood sugar tends to spike during winter months when cold stresses your body, causing it to release hormones like cortisol to provide energy—and that in turn decrease insulin production. Another factor in elevated blood sugar? Our natural inclination to “hibernate”—not in a cave in the woods, but in our homes, with plenty of delicious but unhealthy carbs. So, a few tips:

Check your blood sugar on a regular basis, especially if you feel sluggish or unwell.

Examine the skin of your hands and feet every day for cracks and cuts, which can make you more susceptible to infections.

Make sure to keep all medications and supplies away from extreme cold. Insulin should be cool, but never, ever, frozen. The same goes for GLP-1 agonists (Ozempic, Trulicity, etc.) which if frozen are rendered useless. Cold can also harm insulin pumps and continuous glucose monitors.

If you use a finger stick to take glucose readings, never do it with cold hands—blood vessels constrict in cold weather, which can lead to abnormally low readings. Place your hands under warm running water for a few minutes first.

Try to eat healthy foods, low in carbs and sugar. There are plenty of hearty foods in this category which can satisfy your winter cravings. Check out the American Diabetes Association's Food Hub, which is full of healthy and easy to prepare recipes.

Focus on staying healthy

Being sick with the flu, or even with just a bad cold, is stressful for you and makes your diabetes harder to manage. A few simple tips:

Get your flu shot, if you haven't already. People may think it's late in the season, but according to a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study of the last 40 years of flu seasons, the flu often peaks in February or even March.

Try to get seven or eight hours of sleep, if you can. One winter plus is that people report sleeping better; this is because our body's core temperature decreases more quickly, thus producing melatonin, which can help us relax into slumber. So skip the warm bath and turn down the thermostat!

Drink lots of fluids. Cold weather can dull your thirst response, so you might not feel like drinking as much—people also naturally turn to warmer fluids in the winter but consume less of them. But even if you don't feel thirsty, you can still be dehydrated, which can elevate your blood sugar.



Exercise

This is always an important part of your diabetes management, of course – at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise five days a week, or 150 minutes in total. But in the winter it's dark and cold, mornings and evenings, and snowy or icy conditions can make biking or running impossible and even walking precarious. But you do have other exercise options:

At home: There are numerous ways to exercise at home without purchasing expensive equipment. Take an online exercise class, walk around the house and up and down your stairs as much as you can, tracking your activity with any one of a number of apps. Don't forget to add moderate to intense muscle-strengthening activity (resistance bands or hand weights) twice a week.

At the gym: Working out in a gym or YMCA is a great way to get exercise. Find one with a pool, if possible, and numerous ways to get aerobic work done, from treadmills to Stairmasters to stationary bikes. Make sure the gym is convenient for you to get to – no one wants a long ride through traffic on a dark winter night after work.

Outdoors: Exercising outdoors in cold weather is a great way to control your blood sugar, help you sleep better and feel more energetic. That can mean running, snowshoeing, skating, skiing, or just walking. A few simple tips:

- **Dress in layers**, with shirts of wicking material, if possible, and waterproof outerwear. Wear a hat that covers your ears.
- **Protect your hands and feet** by wearing moisture-wicking cotton or wool socks and waterproof shoes with thick soles. If you become aware of any decreased sensation to your extremities, seek warmth immediately. If it persists, call your healthcare provider.
- **Check your blood sugar before exercise and always carry fast-acting glucose tablets or candy.** Check your blood sugar again after exercise, which can alert you to delayed hypoglycemia, a condition where your body continues to use glucose after exercise, thus resulting in delayed low blood sugar.

Sources: <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/articles/managing-diabetes-cold-weather.html> | <https://www.chop.edu/health-resources/controlling-blood-sugar-during-winter> | https://www.can.msu.edu/news/winter_weather_and_diabetes | <https://diabetesvoice.org/en/living-with-diabetes/diabetes-in-a-cold-climate/> | <https://www.diabetesselfmanagement.com/about-diabetes/general-diabetes-information/diabetes-winter-tips/> | <https://www.diabetes.co.uk/diabetes-and-cold-weather.html> | <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2009/03/18/most-like-it-hot/> | <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/season.html> | <https://news.uthscsa.edu/a-cold-room-not-a-warm-bath-encourages-sleep/>

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