

STAY HEALTHY THIS WINTER

With winter upon us there are many ways to stay fit and healthy and make sure you can enjoy the best the season has to offer. By **Greg Mattocks-Evans**

AS THE nights draw in and temperatures continue to dip, it's the time of year when we're most vulnerable to colds and flu, but there are many ways to help you to beat the winter bugs.

It sounds simple but staying warm is crucial to staying healthy during the winter months. Keep your living room at around 21°C/70°F and the rest of the house at 18°C/64°F.

When you go outside keep your face, hands and feet well wrapped up and remember that many thin layers are better than one thick layer.

Exercise is vital for your general well-being and fitness, but it can also play a vital role in keeping you warm in the winter months. When you're indoors try not to sit still for more than an hour. If you can, try and do roughly half an hour of exercise a day as this helps to lower the production of stress hormones, which helps your white blood cells to fight disease more effectively. It also helps you sleep better, which also reduces stress.

When it's cold and dark outside it can be tempting to seek

Six essential winter vitamins

■ **Vitamin B** Found in turkey, prune juice, chickpeas and bananas this boosts white blood cells that defend the immune system.

■ **Vitamin C** We associate Vitamin C with citrus fruits but it can also be found in a wide range of fruit and vegetables including strawberries, green beans and raw peppers. It's high in immune system-boosting antioxidants

■ **Vitamin D** This helps the thymus gland generate immune system cells. Produced by sunlight but also found in eggs and butter

■ **Zinc** This gives immune system cells the strength to ward off antigens and may even shorten and reduce the severity of colds. It can be found in dark meat, ham, sirloin steak and seafood

■ **Vitamin E** A powerful antioxidant that shields immune cells from free radicals. Find it in whole grains, nuts, seeds, broccoli and fish

■ **Selenium** Another antioxidant which has been associated with lower rates of cancer. It's in whole grains, nuts, seeds, broccoli and fish.

comfort in unhealthy food, but maintaining a healthy and balanced diet in winter is one of the most important ways of building up your resistance to colds and flu.

Try and eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. They can be fresh, frozen, dried, canned or juiced and should make up about a third of your diet.

Many of us don't eat enough fruit and veg, and it can be hard to know how much a 'portion' actually is. Here are a few simple suggestions, which count as one portion each:

■ **Breakfast** A glass of juice or a heaped tablespoon of dried fruit or a banana with your cereal

■ **Snacks** An apple or a pear

■ **Lunch** A side salad or three heaped tablespoons of baked beans

■ **Dinner** Three heaped tablespoons of vegetables like peas or carrots or sweetcorn.

Try and avoid 'bad' fats, such as the polyunsaturated variety, found in meats and full-fat dairy products, which suppress the immune system. Olive oil is a



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good alternative that is naturally high in valuable antioxidants, which act as a natural immune booster. Nuts and seeds are high in 'good' fatty acids, which help cells in the body function properly.

If you can, avoid more than four alcoholic drinks a day. A hot toddy before bed may feel like it warms you up but it actually does the opposite. Alcohol causes blood vessels to dilate, which shifts blood flow to the surface of the skin where nerve endings respond to changes in temperature.

Unsurprisingly, warm

blood flowing closer to our body's natural thermometers gives us the sensation of warmth, but letting blood flow so close to the skin allows cold outside air to steal heat, lowering our body's core temperature.

Instead drink plenty of water and the occasional hot drink. Water is not only an invaluable nutrient but it also gives you a direct immune advantage. When you are fully hydrated the mucus in your throat is more effective at trapping cold particles, thus helping to keep infection at bay.

Warm up with a hot chocolate

It's the quintessential winter treat, but hot chocolate is more than just an indulgent luxury. Cocoa is naturally high in disease-fighting flavonoids, also found in red wine and many fruit and vegetables including apples and grapefruit. They not only enhance the effects of Vitamin C but protect blood vessels and strengthen tiny capillaries, allowing oxygen and essential nutrients to get through to all the cells.

As well as the nutritional benefits, flavonoids increase production of endorphins in the brain, which create a feeling of calm and reduce stress levels.

Of course there is a caveat - many commercial cocoa products are low in cocoa and high in processed sugars and fats. To get round this why not try making your own cocoa from scratch using this simple recipe.

Healthy homemade cocoa MAKES TWO CUPS

Ingredients

- 16oz semi-skimmed milk
- 2 tbsp unsweetened ground cocoa
- 1 tbsp agave nectar (available from Holland & Barrett) or maple syrup
- pinch of cinnamon.

Heat the milk in a saucepan without letting it boil. Stir in the cocoa and agave. Pour, sip, add a dash of cinnamon and enjoy!

ARTHRITIS IN WINTER

ARTHRITIS AFFECTS people throughout the year but as we get colder and wetter weather in the winter months it can be harder to manage the symptoms. There are, however, a number of ways to make winter more bearable for those who suffer from the condition.

Somerset King, right, from Enfield, North London was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis in 2010. The 34-year-old said: "I had two young children when I was diagnosed and I worked as a teacher. It affected my whole life; I found it harder to write, open jars and bottles. It was even painful just to climb the stairs at night to go to bed."

She says that it used to be particularly bad in the winter. "I would know before I got out of bed what the weather would be due to the stiffness in my joints. The fatigue used to be unbearable"

She managed her pain using medication up until two and half years ago but decided she had to try something else to help her cope with her arthritis. Somerset gave up her stressful teaching job and drastically changed her diet, giving up wheat, gluten, sugar and processed food. "To this day I'm drug and pain free. They tell you that

diet doesn't work, you'll have this for the rest of your life but I've proved otherwise.

"There is more and more research in gut health which says that doctors should recommend dietary changes instead of just handing out medication."

She says that managing stress has also been key in her recovery.

"It's very important to switch off from your job and try something you enjoy, like meditation. Light exercise can also be really beneficial."

Somerset has now set up a local support group for similar people in her condition and has shared her story with hundreds of others.

"Now I'm well and able to meet people in the same situation. No one understands it until you have it yourself."

Sharon Brooks' advice for arthritis sufferers is "you don't have to give up, I've seen people with problems a lot worse than me so I think I should just get on with it." The 51-year-old, left, from Buckinghamshire, was diagnosed with fibromyalgia several years ago, a condition which causes pain over much of the body. She also suffers with migraines and epilepsy.

"In winter I have to wrap my left arm in a warm blanket when it gets cold to take the

edge off the pain. I also take between two and four showers a day to keep my muscles warm. I have low days but they don't look low to other people because I'm bubbly!"

If her upper body is not kept active Sharon says that the pain would be even greater, which is why she has turned to painting. Using social media site Twitter she asks her followers for suggestions and pictures she can draw.

"It's a gentle exercise for the upper body. And any of the money I make goes to charity. If I make enough to pay for the next lot of supplies then that's good."

She also enjoys going out for walks with her

husband, who recently changed his career plan so he could work more sociable hours and spend more time with Sharon.

"We can get out and do things now, before then I was a bit of a prisoner. We've bought a mini tripod so we can take pictures more easily. I love capturing the change of seasons."

■ For more on Somerset's story look out online for her Facebook and Instagram page Purely Somerset

■ For more information on all aspects of arthritis go to: (www.arthritiscare.org.uk), Helpline: 0808 800 4050.



What are antioxidants?

Antioxidants help fight oxidation, a chemical process that happens in the body every day. It can be accelerated by stress, cigarette smoking and alcohol. Disruption to this process creates potentially damaging free radicals, unstable molecules that attack nearby molecules. Oxygen triggers the formation of these chemicals, which can cause the body's cells to function poorly or die.

This is where antioxidants come in. These molecules combat the free radicals and protect cells from the attack from oxygen. Keeping up your levels of antioxidants is vital at all times of the year, but especially in winter when so many infections are circulating and we can be at our most vulnerable to illness.

Foods rich in antioxidants include strawberries, blackberries, kale, spinach, Brussels sprouts and broccoli.



Get your flu jab

Doctors recommend flu jabs and the NHS provide them for anyone who will be aged 65 or over on March 31, 2017, as well as carers or people with any of the following conditions:

- Long-term respiratory disease, such as severe asthma, COPD or bronchitis
- Chronic heart disease
- Chronic kidney disease
- Chronic liver disease such as hepatitis
- Chronic neurological disease, such as a stroke, TIA or post-polio syndrome
- Diabetes
- A weakened immune system due to medical conditions, or treatments that suppress the immune system such as chemotherapy.

You can have your NHS flu jab at your GP surgery or a local pharmacy that offers the service. The best time to have your jab is in November so don't delay; contact your local GP for more information on when it will be available.

■ For more information go to: (www.nhs.uk).

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STROLLING TO BETTER HEALTH

One of the ways you can keep healthy and fit this winter is by keeping active outdoors. The NHS recommends walking at least 10,000 steps a day to become healthier, and it's an easy way to keep in shape.

According to outdoor holiday provider, HF Holidays, walking breaks have never been so popular, with UK walking holidays to the Brecon Beacons, Western Highlands and Dorset Coast up 20 per cent year-on-year. So why is walking so good for you?

■ **The ultimate mood booster** Walking can help release feel-good endorphins while reducing stress and anxiety. Research shows that walking improves sleep, which translates to better moods and an overall sense of well-being. Furthermore, as an activity that could

be done all year around, it is the perfect way to beat the gloomy autumn and winter blues.

■ **Improved brainpower** Walking can help improve your memory and brain function, because when you walk, your heart rate increases, pumping more oxygen to the brain. This then releases hormones that nourish the growth of brain cells and facilitates information processing.

■ **Enhanced social life** Walking can help you meet and maintain friendships and relationships. Beyond that, if you experience some level of social anxiety, walking has been said to reduce inhibitions, enabling you to interact better with those around you.

■ **Body and soul** Walking can be a life-saver, in both the physical and emotional sense. According to the NHS, walking could save 37,000 lives per year and The British Heart Foundation says brisk walking can help to keep your heart strong by reducing your risk of developing heart disease and high blood pressure. ■ HF Holidays offer guided and self-guided walking holidays in the UK and around the world, aimed at everyone from beginners on their first walk to experts tackling the more challenging trails. For more information go to: (www.hfholidays.co.uk) or tel: 020 3424 6162.

Snuff out the sniffles

Those who wish to avoid the harassment of colds and flu during the winter months often find the herb echinacea to be just what they need. And there is plenty of evidence to back it up.

A four-month long trial carried out at the Common Cold Centre in Cardiff showed that echinacea reduced the number of cold episodes and the number of days cold symptoms were experienced, and reduced the severity of cold symptoms.

It works by supporting the immune system, which is particularly helpful if you are stressed, sleep poorly, or smoke, as all of these factors reduce immune efficiency. With more than 100 types of cold and flu-causing viruses lined up against us, such effective protection is definitely needed.

You will find echinacea products in your health store or pharmacy, licensed to relieve the symptoms of colds and flu. Taking it daily could mean symptoms such as sore throats and headaches will be milder and your body should recover faster.

