Corewell Health
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Baby It's Cold Outside…But Don't Let That Derail Your Workout

Oftentimes, completing your workout doesn't require a lot of thought. Running and walking in the summer basically means you just lace up your shoes and go. But exercising in the winter months can be more complicated and require planning to ensure that you remain safe, comfortable and injury free.

While it can be very invigorating to get outside in the winter months and feel the cool air moving through your lungs, there are factors to take into consideration, including lack of sunlight, ice/snow on the ground and cold temperatures. Your workout may not be as intense in the winter, but it can still be fun, exhilarating and successful if you follow a few safety tips.

Some athletes are deterred by the bitter cold and would rather run on a treadmill or work out inside. This is absolutely fine. But understand that there is no harm in running outside when it's cold. Only when the temperature reaches around -18° F or colder, including the wind chill, should you refrain from exercising outside. Tissue damage can occur very quickly at these temperatures.

Outdoor exercise in the winter starts indoors. Make sure that you are properly hydrated for the distance that you are running. Even though you may seem like you don't sweat as much or feel as thirsty in the winter, a lack of proper hydration can affect your stamina. In the winter, you can start with some warm fluid before you run. Drink room temperature liquids to rehydrate during your run. Drinking very cold liquids can decrease your core temperature, which will already be decreased when you're out in the cold.

A proper warm up is also vitally important to prevent injury to muscles, tendons and ligaments. Performing dynamic stretching for about 8-10 minutes prior to exercise will help warm up your muscles. Leg swings, lunges, mountain climbers and jump squats are a few good exercises to include in your routine.

The type of clothing you wear also is important. You will need moisture-wicking clothing and should avoid cotton. Moisture-wicking clothes will help to remove and evaporate the sweat from your body, whereas cotton will saturate your clothes and turn cold, decreasing your body temperature.

As odd as it sounds, you want to "underdress." The guideline is to dress for about 20 degrees warmer than the outside temperature. So, if it is 20° outside, you will want to dress as if it is 40°. That's because your body temperature will rise as you exercise, and you do not want to overheat. If you are uncertain, think about wearing layers that you can take off and wrap around your waist.

A hat, gloves, socks and face mask are essential parts of outdoor exercise as well. Your fingers, toes, ears and nose are most vulnerable. Exposing these parts of your body to cold temperatures for prolonged periods of time can lead to frostbite, tissue damage and pain. If you experience excessive

redness, burning and numbness in any of your extremities, rewarm them with lukewarm water until symptoms dissipate.

Footwear is important, too. Make sure that your shoes have a good tread on them so that you will have as much grip as possible for any uneven or unknown terrain. Be cautious on slippery surfaces. You may find that decreasing your stride length will help with core stability and lessen your chances of slipping. Treads and spikes also can provide added traction and stability.

Another very important aspect of winter exercise is visibility. The significant lack of sunlight can make outdoor activities more dangerous. If you are going to be running in the early morning or evening, make sure that you wear light colored clothing and a reflective or lighted vest.

You also need to alter your expectations when exercising in the cold. You aren't as likely to set any personal speed records and your stamina may not be as high. Make sure you plan your route in advance, so you don't encounter obstacles. It is also a good idea to shorten your route. That way, if you need to cut your workout short because of the cold, an injury or symptoms of frost bite, you are not far away from your home or car. But that doesn't mean you can't still go the distance. Instead of planning a run or walk for 5 miles out and 5 miles back, you could go 2.5 miles out and back -- twice.

Exercising outdoors in the winter is not for everyone but can provide significant benefits. It can help boost your mood, increase your metabolism and maybe even burn more calories than you would during a warm weather run or walk.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding an exercise program, injury or pain, please reach out to one of our experienced sports medicine physicians at Corewell Health West Orthopedics at (616)267-8860. You can also find more information about our orthopedic program and providers on our website.