

Natural Ways to Beat the Winter Blues

Shorter days and less sunshine cause many people to experience mood and energy changes during winter. Often referred to as the winter blues, these temporary changes can make you feel more sad, lethargic, and tired than usual. The good news is that some easy diet and lifestyle changes can help manage the winter blues naturally.

What Causes the Winter Blues?

The winter blues is a general term, not a medical diagnosis. It refers to a shift in mood, energy, and sleep that often starts around or after the winter holidays and may last for a few weeks. According to the American Psychiatric Association, 38% of Americans report that their mood declines in the winter.¹ Behavior changes are also common and may include:²

- Feeling tired and sleeping more
- Having more disrupted sleep
- Feeling less motivated to do things you usually enjoy
- Feeling more moody
- Craving carbohydrate foods like pasta, potatoes, or sweets

Experts believe winter's shorter days and less exposure to sunlight are likely culprits because they disrupt your body's circadian rhythm or internal clock.² With sun exposure, your body synthesizes serotonin, a neurotransmitter that regulates mood, and vitamin D, which helps activate serotonin. Fewer hours of sunlight, especially at northern latitudes or cloudy regions, can reduce serotonin and vitamin D levels.^{2,3}

Although it is common, most cases of the winter blues are mild and short-lasting, but it can certainly affect your quality of life. Focusing on a few diet and lifestyle changes can help you feel better and manage the symptoms during the winter. The winter blues usually disappear by springtime, with more sunshine and longer days.

Winter Blues vs. Seasonal Affective Disorder

While the winter blues are sometimes called seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and are thought to have the same cause, the two are different. SAD is a medical condition that causes more severe and longer-lasting depression during the winter months. Symptoms can include:³

- Feeling sad or empty most of the day for weeks or months at a time
- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Feeling irritable or restless
- Loss of interest in regular activities or hobbies
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Fatigue and low energy
- Changes in sleep, such as poor sleep quality or oversleeping
- Changes in appetite, such as overeating or craving carbohydrate foods
- Physical aches or pains, headaches, or digestive problems
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Like the winter blues, seasonal affective disorder often worsens in the winter and improves as spring approaches. However, it's crucial to call your doctor if you have symptoms of SAD, especially severe depression or mood changes that affect your daily life and ability to function.

Natural Ways to Manage the Winter Blues

The winter blues are predictable, starting and ending at the same time each year. Advance planning can reduce their severity and make winter more bearable. These strategies can help.

Get regular exercise outdoors whenever possible. Exercise provides a natural energy and mood boost. Aim for at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity each day, such as brisk walking, hiking, kickboxing, snowshoeing, or swimming if you have access to an indoor pool. Exercise outside in sunlight as often as possible.

Don't skimp on sleep. Aim for seven to nine hours of quality sleep each night, but don't overdo it. Try to get to bed and wake up at the same time each day. Melatonin, a hormone produced in your brain in response to darkness, helps regulate your body's sleep-wake cycle. Some people produce too much melatonin in winter's darkness. Good sleep hygiene practices can help maintain healthy melatonin levels. They include:

- Keep your bedroom dark at night and avoid blue light from your cell phone, tablet, laptop, or television before bedtime. If you can see your hand at arm's length, it is not dark enough.
- Take a warm bath, meditate, or do gentle yoga before bed. These help reduce cortisol (a stress hormone) levels, allowing melatonin levels to rise naturally.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and heavy foods or meals late in the day.

Plan social activities. The winter blues can make you feel sad, lonely, and isolated, so try to get out of the house and socialize. Plan at least one activity you enjoy each week, so you have something to look forward to. Try to get together with friends or family regularly to avoid feeling isolated.

Feed your brain. Winter comfort foods are often high in starch and sugar. The quickly digested carbohydrates they provide can boost feel-good hormones like serotonin and dopamine, making you feel better. However, the effect is short-lasting, and comfort foods like desserts, pasta, or creamy casseroles often promote weight gain. Complex carbohydrates from whole foods are a better, healthier, and longer-lasting way to promote healthy levels of serotonin and other neurohormones. Try to feed your brain these healthy carbohydrate foods instead:

- Fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables - eat one or two servings per meal and snack.
- Starchy vegetables such as roasted purple or sweet potatoes, winter squash, or peas. These are high in fiber and provide a mix of protein and complex carbohydrates that fuel your brain and body for several hours.
- Legumes (beans) such as lentils, chickpeas, kidney, black, or pinto beans. These are also high in fiber, complex carbohydrates, protein, and brain-healthy nutrients.
- Nuts and seeds. All nuts and seeds provide complex carbohydrates and healthy fats, which are crucial for brain health and neurotransmitter function.

Seek sunlight. To optimize serotonin production, try to get 20-30 minutes of sunlight exposure in the morning after waking or at least early in the day. If it's too cold to get outside, sit near a window, and if you live in a cloudy region, ask your healthcare provider about using a lightbox. These are designed to mimic sunlight and deliver a therapeutic dose of full-spectrum light. Not all lightbox devices are the same, and they may not be appropriate for those with eye problems or who use photosensitizing medications, so talk to your doctor before trying one.

Consider nutritional supplements. Lifestyle therapies should be your first line of defense against the winter blues, but supplements may provide additional support. Ask your healthcare provider about using these supplements:

- **Vitamin D** - This vitamin is present in a few foods, like oily fish, egg yolks, and fortified milk. Most vitamin D is made when your skin is directly exposed to sunlight. As a result, many people get inadequate vitamin D during the winter months. Get tested to check if your levels are adequate.
- **[5-HTP](#)** (5-hydroxytryptophan) - Your body converts this compound into serotonin. It is safe for most people to take but should not be used with certain medications, so talk to your doctor first.
- **[Calm Support](#)** - This blend of botanical adaptogens provides central nervous system support for a healthy stress response and stress-induced sugar cravings.
- **[Ther-Biotic® Complete](#)** - This broad-spectrum probiotic supports your microbiome and gut-brain axis.

The winter blues can take a toll on your emotional well-being, but healthy nutrition and lifestyle changes can often help. Always talk to your healthcare provider about treatment options if your symptoms are severe or affecting your daily life.

References

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