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Marpai (Mar-pay), your company health plan services provider, brings you SMART Health Insights to help you feel great and live well through better health. Every month you'll receive tips for better physical and mental wellness, highlights of exciting new health technology products and news from Marpai designed to improve your health journey. This is part of how your company health plan helps you live well through better health.

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WINTER ASTHMA

By Eric Metcalf, MPH

Medically Reviewed by Hansa D. Bhargava, MD on September 25, 2013
<https://www.webmd.com/asthma/features/winter-asthma>

For many people, asthma attacks may happen more often in the winter. "There are two challenges for people with asthma in the winter. One is that they spend more time inside. The other is that it's cold outside," says H. James Wedner, MD, an asthma expert at Washington University in St. Louis.

While you're indoors, you breathe in asthma triggers such as mold, pet dander, dust mites, and even fires in the fireplace. When you venture out, you could have an asthma attack from inhaling the cold air. Here's how to breathe easier during the cold months.

Learn Your Triggers

When you inhale something that triggers your asthma, your airways – the tubes in your lungs that carry air – can become tight and clogged with mucus. You may cough, wheeze, and struggle to catch your breath.

Talk to your doctor about having tests to find out what your triggers are. Once you know them, you can make some changes at home that may help:

Limit time around pets. Having a dog or cat in your home may trigger your asthma. Try to keep it out of the bedroom. Curbing allergy triggers where you sleep can make a big difference, Wedner says.

Cover bedding. If mites are a trigger, use mite-proof covers on the mattress, box springs, and pillows, he says. These help keep dust mites away overnight.

Keep the house cool and dry. Dust mites as well as mold don't grow very well when it's cool and dry," Wedner says. Ways to help keep your home dry during the winter include:

1. Run the fan in your bathroom when taking a bath or shower.
2. Use the exhaust fan in the kitchen when cooking or using the dishwasher.
3. Fix leaky pipes and windows.

The common cold and flu are both more likely to strike in the winter and can lead to asthma flare-ups. You can lower your family's risk of these illnesses, though:

Wash your hands. This helps keep viruses from getting into your body when you touch your eyes, nose, or mouth.

Stay away from people who are ill. If a coworker or friend has the cold or flu, keep your distance.

Get a flu shot. Experts suggest that most people get a flu shot each year. This helps protect you from catching the flu.

Tips to Avoid Cold Air

To protect yourself from asthma flare-ups due to chilly weather, Wedner offers these suggestions:

Cover your face: Drape a scarf across your mouth and nose, or wear a winter face mask that covers the bottom half of your face.

Exercise indoors. Work out at a gym or inside your home, or walk laps inside a mall.



Treating Winter Asthma

People with asthma not only use quick-relief meds; they often need to take medicine every day for long-term asthma control. But sometimes they make the mistake of stopping the medications when they no longer feel symptoms, Wedner says.

So, even if you haven't had a flare-up for a long time, be sure to follow your doctor's directions for controlling your asthma. As winter nears, make sure you have current prescriptions for all medications.

Talk to your doctor about an asthma action plan, says Daniel Jackson, MD, of the University of Wisconsin. The plan should make it clear when to take each type of medication and when to call the doctor or call for emergency medical help. Divide the plan into three categories or zones:

1. How to handle your asthma when you're feeling good and have no symptoms.
2. What to do if you start to have symptoms.
3. The steps to take if your symptoms are severe or you can't control them.
4. You probably won't need to change your action plan for the winter, Jackson says. But since you may be more likely to need it during the cold months, make sure you review your plan before winter and keep it handy.

Tips for Children

As winter approaches, you can help your child have fewer asthma problems, too:

Give them some responsibility for keeping their asthma under control. This includes knowing how to avoid triggers and how to follow their action plan.

Discuss your child's action plan with the school nurse.

Teach the importance of proper hand washing, especially during cold and flu season.

MAKING YOUR RESOLUTIONS STICK

How to Create Healthy Habits

Published by News In Health | <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2010/12/making-your-resolutions-stick>

New Year's resolutions—they're easy to make but easier to break. Why is it so hard to make the healthy changes that we know can help us feel better and live longer? And why is it so hard to make them last? NIH-funded scientists are learning more about how we can make healthy changes and, even more important, how we can sustain them.

"Change is always possible," says Dr. Linda Nebeling, an expert in behavioral change and nutrition at NIH. You're never too out-of-shape, too overweight or too old to make healthy changes.

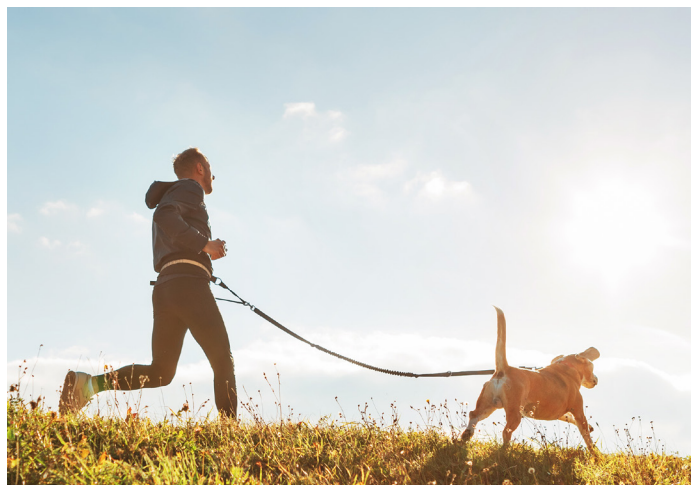
Some of the most common New Year's resolutions are losing weight, getting more physical activity, eating more nutritious foods, quitting cigarettes, cutting back on alcohol, reducing stress and sleeping better. But no matter which healthy resolution you choose, research suggests that some common strategies can boost your chance of making the change a habit, a part of your daily lifestyle.

"One challenge with New Year's resolutions is that people often set unrealistic goals. They can quickly become frustrated and give up," says Nebeling. **"Any resolution to change needs to include small goals that are definable and accompanied by a solid plan on how you'll get to that goal."**

For instance, a resolution to lose 30 pounds may seem overwhelming. Instead, try setting smaller goals of losing 5 pounds a month for 6 months. Think baby steps rather than giant leaps.

Next, develop an action plan. You might decide to walk a half hour each day to burn calories. You might stop buying vending machine snacks. Or you might limit and keep track of your daily calories. "These are specific behaviors that could help you meet your larger goal of losing 30 pounds," says Dr. Deborah Tate, an obesity and behavioral researcher at the University of North Carolina.

To make a long-lasting change in your life, prepare yourself for the challenges you might face. "Think about why you want to make the change. Is it important to you, or is it mostly influenced by others—like your doctor, your spouse or a friend?" says Tate. "Research suggests that if it's something you really want for yourself, if it's meaningful to you, you're more likely to stick to it."



Think of exactly how the change will enhance your life. For instance, when you stop smoking, your risk plummets for cancer, heart disease, stroke and early death. Reducing stress might cut your risk for heart disease and help you fight off germs. Even small improvements in your physical activity, weight or nutrition may help reduce your risk for disease and lengthen your life. In one study, overweight or obese people who lost just 7% of their body weight slashed their risk for diabetes by nearly 60%. Keeping facts like this in mind can help you maintain your focus over the long haul.



Setting up a supportive environment is another step toward success. "Think about the physical support you'll need, like the right equipment for exercise, appropriate clothing and the right kinds of foods to have at home," says Dr. Christine Hunter, a behavioral researcher and clinical psychologist at NIH. Remove items that might trip up your efforts. If you're quitting smoking, throw away your ashtrays and lighters. To improve your nutrition, put unhealthy but tempting foods on a hard-to-reach shelf, or get rid of them.

Social support is also key. Research shows that people's health behaviors—like smoking or weight gain—tend to mirror those of their friends, family and spouses. "You can enlist friends and family to help you eat better, to go on walks with you, to remind you to stay on track," says Tate. "Find things that are fun to do together, and you'll be more likely to stick with it."

"It helps when you're connected to a group, where lifestyle change like weight loss is a joint goal," says NIH's Dr. Sanford Garfield, who heads a large study called the Diabetes Prevention Program. Participants who lost weight through dietary changes and physical activity reduced their chances of developing diabetes. Group counseling that emphasized effective diet, exercise and behavior modification were credited, in part, with participants' success. "There's a long history of group support leading to good results," Garfield says. "People learn from each other and reinforce each other in working toward their goals."

While making a change is one thing, sticking to it is something else. "Maintaining a change requires continued commitment until the change

becomes a part of your life, like brushing your teeth or washing your hair,” says Nebeling. “People who can maintain or engage in efforts to change their behavior, and do it for 6 to 8 weeks, are more likely to be able to support that effort longer term.”

Some researchers are studying people who’ve made lasting healthy changes. The ongoing National Weight Control Registry compiles information on more than 5,000 adults who’ve dropped at least 30 pounds and kept it off for a year or more. Although the way these people lost their weight varied, those who’ve maintained their weight loss tend to use similar strategies. Notably, many participants track their progress closely, often in a daily journal or diary. If the numbers rise, they have an early warning to adjust their behaviors.

“Self-monitoring or tracking seems to be critical for almost every sort of behavior change,” says Hunter. That includes jotting down the foods you eat, keeping an exercise diary or making a record of your sleeping patterns.

Monitoring yourself might feel like a burden, but it’s one of the best predictors of successful change. “Think about how you can make tracking more convenient, so it fits naturally into your life,” Hunter says. For some people, that might be a pad of paper in a purse or pocket; for others, a mobile app or a computer program.

Make sure to have a plan to get back on track if you start to slip. “If you feel that your motivation is waning, think back and remind yourself why the change was important to you in the first place,” says Tate. “Maybe you wanted to have more stamina, feel better, to be able to play with grandchildren. Recalling these personal reasons can encourage you to get back on track.”

Of course, you don’t need a new year to make healthy changes; you can make them any time of the year. But New Year’s is an opportunity to think about the improvements you’d like to make and then take concrete steps to achieve them. Set realistic goals, develop an action plan and set it in motion. **Make your new year a healthy one.**



CAN A NAP BOOST BRAIN HEALTH?

How to Create Healthy Habits

Published by Johns Hopkins Medicine | <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/can-a-nap-boost-brain-health>



Are you feeling a little guilty about your daily, mid-afternoon snooze? Don't. Research shows that catching a few ZZZs after lunch can be good for your brain. But keep in mind that the length of your nap matters.

While a 30- to 90-minute nap in older adults appears to have brain benefits, anything longer than an hour and a half may create problems with cognition, the ability to think and form memories, according to the study published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.

"I consider napping to be a good thing, but it needs to be taken in the context of the person and his or her own sleep cycles and body," says Charlene Gamaldo, M.D., medical director of Johns Hopkins Sleep Disorders Center. For older people, as the study showed, longer naps tend to interfere with cognition, she says.

Napping for a Better Brain

Researchers looked at data from 2,974 people in China ages 65 and older. Nearly 60 percent of participants reported napping after lunch for about an hour.

Scientists found that people who napped for 30 to 90 minutes had better word recall – which is a sign of good memory – than people who did not nap or who napped for longer than 90 minutes. People who napped for that golden 30 to 90 minutes were also better at figure drawing, another sign of good cognition.

One theory explaining poor cognition in those who take longer naps: Resting more during the day may be a sign of poor quality nighttime sleep, according to Gamaldo. "In the study, naps longer than 90 minutes could have been called 'a second sleep.'" This poor quality nighttime sleep – the kind that requires extra-long napping during the day – can lead to cognitive problems, she adds.

TAKE AN AFTERNOON CAT NAP

Research says that the best time for older adults to take to nap is between 1 and 4 p.m. because of their sleep-wake cycles, says Charlene Gamaldo, M.D., medical director of Johns Hopkins Sleep Disorders Center. "Napping this time of day will provide you with the most bang for your buck," she says.

Ideally, the nap should last between 20 and 40 minutes to avoid feeling groggy immediately after you wake up. "A quick cat nap should be restorative," she says. Shorter naps also ensure you don't have trouble falling asleep at night.

More Problems with Longer Naps

Longer naps can pose a couple of other problems, says Gamaldo, including:

Temporary grogginess: People who take longer naps may feel groggy immediately after they wake up, says Gamaldo. "Because they are sleeping longer, they may wake up from a deeper stage of sleep, which occurs later in the cycle, and feel fuzzy headed," she says.

Inability to sleep at night: Gamaldo has seen patients who take long naps during the day have insomnia at night. "You might want to think about limiting your napping if you're having problems with insomnia, or it's taking you more than 30 minutes to fall asleep at bedtime."

A Fine Balance

Overall, studies show that people who sleep too much or too little may have poor health and even a shorter life span. Consequently, "people need to get the right quantity and quality of rest," says Gamaldo.

TECHNOLOGY AND MENTAL HEALTH

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<https://www.bhjustice.org/technology-and-mental-health>

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, nearly one in five adults in the U.S. experiences mental illness in any given year, and between four to five percent of U.S. adults have a serious mental illness. Approximately one in five youth in the U.S. have, or will have, a mental disorder at some point in their lifetime. At the same time, the National Council for Behavioral Health reports that nearly six in ten (56%) Americans are seeking or wanting to seek mental health services either for themselves or for a loved one.

The prevalence of mental health conditions combined with the lack of access to care and more sophisticated technology has stimulated interest in the use of technology to enhance and expand mental health care.

BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY

Although not a panacea for the lack of mental health care, the use of technology can enhance and expand mental health care in areas, including rural areas, where providers are scarce. Technology may assist clinicians in reaching difficult-to-reach populations due to geographical barriers or the stigma associated with seeking help. The fact that some types of technology, such as apps, are lower in cost than traditional care may also facilitate access. Plus, technology is convenient. As the National Institute of Mental Health points out, treatment can take place in any place and at any time, 24/7.

As with any technology, there are also concerns about its use. Common concerns include the need to protect privacy, research that demonstrates that technology works as well as traditional methods, and an array of ethical issues. Despite this, the potential for technology to help improve mental health care is promising.

WHAT KINDS OF TECHNOLOGY EXIST?

Mobile applications

There are currently over one thousand mobile apps devoted to mental health, with many focused on anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Mental health apps allow people who are hesitant to seek face-to-face services find help, often anonymously. Mobile apps also allow doctors and mental health professionals to monitor progress and treatment adherence. Although these apps have great potential, there is very little regulation of mental health apps or research on their effectiveness. However, they can often be a good first step for those who have avoided mental health care in the past.

Currently, apps exist for:

- Self-management: user adds information, so that the app can provide feedback (i.e., medication reminders).
- Thinking skills
- Skill-training: help users learn new coping or thinking skills; often set up like games.
- Illness management, supported care: allow users to get additional support by interacting with another human being.



Internet-based support groups

Support groups, such as Big White Wall, provide an option for individuals who prefer to remain anonymous in accessing mental health treatment or who cannot easily access treatment during ordinary working hours. In addition to anonymity and round-the-clock help, these sites often offer educational resources and may offer opportunities for members to talk to one another.

Telehealth

Telehealth is technology that allows an individual to consult with a health care provider via phone or video chat. Telehealth can be beneficial for mental health treatment because it reduces costs of services and improves access to services for those who cannot see a mental health professional in person.

Virtual reality

Virtual reality is relatively new; however, it is rapidly becoming important in the field of mental health. As Digital Health Today reports, virtual reality headsets can “help desensitize patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, by recreating their personal triggers. This helps them develop coping techniques.” This technology can also help patients suffering from depression, anxiety, and other disorders.

Using mental health technology

- Tips for individuals thinking about using technology
- Ask a trusted provider for a recommendation.
- Find information on the credentials and experience of the app developer(s).
- Turn to the literature to see if there are any empirical publications on the technology.
- Determine if the app is based on an empirically supported treatment, like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

Tips for providers thinking about using technology

- Remember that technology is still relatively new, so do your homework. What are the opportunities for using technology to supplement traditional care? What are the limitations?
- Think about how you’ll engage patients.
- Implement strict quality controls to ensure data privacy and security.
- Develop protocols for handling emergencies.