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Bring on the cold! Helpful tips for embracing the winter season

News

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During a normal year, the onset of winter naturally brings changes to our daily lives. It's a period of transition in which we begin retreating into our homes and avoiding the outdoors. Here in Manitoba, many of us cringe at the thought of strong winds, icy roads and sidewalks, and frigid temperatures.

Despite the familiar sight of snow on the streets, this year's transition into winter is anything but normal as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to disrupt our routines. All of us have had to maintain physical distance from our communities, families and friends, and have faced other personal, financial and social challenges.

In warmer months, many of us were able to alleviate some of the stress caused by these challenges by spending time outdoors – finding comfort, peace and maybe even a new appreciation for the natural spaces and water bodies within our city limits, and those located well beyond. Spending time outdoors and staying active can have such a positive impact on our mental and physical health, and well-being.

The arrival of winter doesn't mean our connection to nature has to end. There are lots of ways to embrace the outdoors and stay active. Here are a few tips to help make your outdoor winter experience safe and satisfying.

Dress appropriately: clothing matters!

One of the most important aspects of outdoor winter activities is knowing how to dress appropriately for colder temperatures. If you're cold or wet, you'll be less likely to enjoy your winter experience. When dressing for winter, dress in layers so you can easily adjust your body temperature by shedding or adding layers.

The first layer sits against your skin and is called the base layer. This layer helps keep you dry by "wicking" moisture off your skin and moving it towards the surface of the fabric where it can evaporate. Long underwear or thermal long sleeves and leggings made of wool or synthetic materials are the best options.

The next layer is called the mid-layer; it traps body heat to keep you warm. Examples of good mid-layer items are fleeces and sweaters, especially those with a high collar and tightened cuffs. The last layer is your winter jacket. This layer is your outer shell, which will protect you from the elements like wind and snow.

Finally, remember to cover your extremities (head, neck, hands and feet) by wearing a tuque, scarf, mitts, wool socks and insulated winter boots.

Staying hydrated

Winter dehydration is often overlooked. Most people associate dehydration with sweating and hot, sunny days. In cold weather, we tend to believe that we sweat less, but in reality, our perspiration simply evaporates more quickly. This means that while our bodies are losing moisture, it doesn't seem like our bodies are sweating – and so we don't think that we need to drink as much water. Cold weather can also make us feel less thirsty (and tends to make us pee more!), while wearing bulkier winter clothing and working hard during winter activities – think: shovelling snow – can make us sweat more and lose more water.

Stay hydrated in cold weather by:

- Drinking warm beverages like decaffeinated teas or hot cider (try to avoid caffeinated drinks because they can cause dehydration and consider bringing a thermos to keep your drink warm!);
- Challenging yourself to drink a certain amount of water each day;
- Carrying a reusable water bottle; and
- Eating lots of fruit and vegetables! You can get water from the foods you eat.

It's also important to know and recognize the signs and symptoms of dehydration. These can include thirst, dark-coloured urine, dizziness, fatigue and dry skin.

Winter activities

There are lots of ways to stay active and spend time outdoors this winter. Many summer activities such as walking, hiking and biking can be winterized; the only difference is the clothing you'll need!

Consider exploring some of your favourite summer spots during the winter. You may be surprised – and delighted – by how different these areas appear under a blanket of ice and snow.

Speaking of ice and snow, winter's defining characteristics are the conditions needed for activities such as snowshoeing, ice fishing, cross-country skiing, skating and tobogganing. This season might be a perfect time to pick up a new winter hobby. (Be honest: when's the last time you built a snow fort?) With social distancing measures likely to be in place throughout the winter, outdoor activities are a great way to spend time with family and friends while also respecting public health guidelines. [Manitoba's provincial parks offer a wide range of trails and locations to enjoy a variety of winter activities.](#)

Whether it's a trip out to the lake or a walk around your neighbourhood, spending time in nature can be a restorative, rejuvenating experience. Practice mindfulness when you're outdoors. Listen to the sounds the ice make when it shifts. Feel the bite of wind on your cheeks. Smell the woodsmoke from your neighbour's fireplace. Watch out for birds, squirrels and deer – creatures small and large who are still very much alive, active and present throughout our wild spaces and within our city limits. Breathe deeply and remember that we are all connected by this amazing natural environment we share.

Safety first

It's always important to take safety precautions when you're outside in nature. This is especially true in winter months, when below-freezing temperatures bring additional risks to certain activities, particularly those involving water. Stay safe this winter by:

- Checking the weather before leaving for your winter activity and choosing appropriate clothing based on the forecast;
- Always bringing a few extra pieces of clothing (base layer, tuque, mitts, socks) to change into or add on in case you get cold or wet;
- Informing a trusted contact of your route, and your planned date/time of departure and return if you're planning a day trip or longer overnight excursion; and
- Familiarizing yourself with ice safety if you're going out on a body of water ([this resource from the Canadian Red Cross](#) is a good place to start).

Snuggling under a favourite blanket with a warm cup of tea feels that much more comforting after having spent a few hours out in the cold. As we all continue to adapt to new and uncertain circumstances, consider making a conscious effort to explore winter's beauty – and enjoy some of the many benefits winter activities can provide.

"If you choose not to find joy in the snow, you will have less joy in your life but still the same amount of snow." - Unknown

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