

Winter Walking

Outdoor walking in winter air has many benefits

By Denise Lynn Mann (<http://www.arthritistoday.org/>)

Just because the trees are bare and there's a chill in the air doesn't mean you have to forgo your daily walks outside for the dreaded treadmill. Anything but! In fact, outdoor walking during winter may have surprising benefits for people with arthritis.



Walking in winter air can:

Keep bones strong. Like bears, people tend to hibernate during the winter and, as a result, get too little sunlight, explains Lynn Millar, PhD, a physical therapist and professor at Andrews University in Barrien Springs, Mich. That's too bad for bones. Sun exposure triggers vitamin D production in the skin, and bones need the "sunshine vitamin" to make the body absorb bone-strengthening calcium properly. Not getting outside during winter months slows down production and decreases the body's store of vitamin D.

"Vitamin D is important for keeping bones strong; it's particularly important for people with arthritis who take **corticosteroids**, because they have an increased risk of brittle bones," says Millar. Going for a winter walk and getting 15 minutes of sun on your face and hands two to three times per week should suffice for getting enough sun for vitamin D production.

Improve mood. Sunlight and just being outdoors can do wonders for lifting your mood, says Millar. Spending time with friends walking can have positive effects on mood and decrease pain. A University of Washington in Seattle study of 112 women aged 19 to 78 shows that women who took a brisk, outdoor walk for 20 minutes daily had better mood, higher self-esteem and an improved sense of well-being at the end of the eight-week study. Winter walking could provide an effective, easy-to-stick-with therapy for mild-to-moderate depression, say the researchers, especially for those who experience side effects from prescription treatment options.

Motivate. You are more likely to complete a workout on a walking route if you walk outdoors, simply because you need to return home or to your car, says Millar. On a treadmill, however, you can hit 'stop' as soon as boredom strikes.

Burn calories. Outdoor walking through the park or around the neighborhood on a cold day won't burn any more calories than walking on a warm summer day, but walking in the snow will. "You expend more energy because it's harder to move your feet in the snow, and you lift your legs a little higher," she explains.