

Winter-works projects for health



SO HERE WE ARE, dear readers, in the thick of winter. The holidays are over. The bills are pouring in and you're poring over them. There's nothing much to look forward to until Valentine's Day — unless you're lucky enough to have booked a Caribbean vacation, which will be over before you know it. What you need to get you through the long dark months is a few healthy winter-works projects, right? How about planning to do some of the following?

GET MORE OF THE SUNSHINE SUBSTANCE, VITAMIN D

This hormone-like vitamin's crucial role in bone health is almost being overshadowed by its protective role against cancers, including colon and breast. No one knows for sure how it protects, but many cells in the body use vitamin D to produce signals that allow cells to communicate with one another. These messages may tell abnormal cells to behave normally and not to start replicating malignantly.

Studies suggest that vitamin D, which the skin manufactures when exposed to solar radiation, reduces the risk of death from various causes. It may also lower the risk of multiple sclerosis, which is most prevalent in temperate climates far from the equator with long sun-skint winters. This vitamin may also help stave off autoimmune disorders and fights infections. Some authorities are recommending 1,000 international units a day through diet and supplements for most adults during the cold months — more for certain at-risk

groups. Exposing your face and hands to the winter sun's rays for a few minutes a day will help your body produce its own vitamin D, too.

KEEP UP ON YOUR EXERCISE

Tempting though it may be to stay curled up by the fire, get moving. In addition to its role in preventing high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and type 2 diabetes, exercise is increasingly seen as important for protecting against cancers such as breast and colon. Exercise may thwart cancer cells by stabilizing excess hormone levels, boosting the vigilance of the immune system, lowering stress levels and promoting healthier body weights.

GET ENOUGH SLEEP

These long dark nights are ideal for catching up on slumber, and too few hours a day will leave you more than bleary-eyed and reaching for a third cup of coffee. Sleep is the time when all our bodily systems do their essential repairs, and sleep deficits are being linked to obesity, diabetes, excess

stress hormone levels, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. The risk of certain cancers such as breast is also being tied to inadequate sleep — possibly because sleep deprivation interrupts the production of melatonin, a nocturnal hormone that can reduce levels of estrogen.

GIVE YOURSELF A CHEAP SHOT

Inject great nutrition into your meals with inexpensive winter vegetables and legumes. Turnips, beets, squash, spuds, parsnips and carrots are great oven-roasted, puréed and buzzed into soups. Casseroles, dips and salads based on dried beans, peas, lentils and peanuts make for great high-fibre winter fare.

TRY SOMETHING NEW

Lest your brain hibernate, sign up for a book club, a foreign language course, a skills-upgrade program or even CPR training.

We hope you make the most of your winter, and we'll see you again in the more clement clime of April.

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