

Winter Blues



By Dr. Lin Day (www.babysensory.com)

Most mothers have days when they feel really down. This is perfectly normal. Looking after a baby, being constantly on call and coping with the daily demands of life is not easy. However, mothers who start to feel more lethargic than usual and perhaps socially withdrawn as the winter season draws in could find themselves experiencing the 'winter blues'.

The 'winter blues' (also known as sub-syndromal seasonal affective disorder), affect about one in 15 adults in the UK. More women suffer from the winter blues than men, although children and adolescents are also vulnerable. The winter blues are extremely rare in countries where daylight hours are long, constant and extremely bright.

The winter blues typically start in September when the nights grow longer and disappear when day length increases in April. Symptoms may include tiredness, lethargy, low concentration levels, social withdrawal, increased appetite, reduced libido and mild depression. Sufferers may also be more vulnerable to infections and other illnesses during the winter months.

If you need more sleep than usual, have difficulty in getting out of bed in the morning, find it difficult to cope with work or normal everyday tasks or suffer from any of the above symptoms, the following tips can help you get back to normal:

Bright light

As darkness falls, the pineal gland (located near the centre of the brain) produces the hormone melatonin, which increases the ability to fall asleep and stay asleep. Bright light has the opposite effect. The rise in melatonin also suppresses libido. Some scientists believe this to be an evolutionary survival response. It means that babies are more likely to be born in the spring or summer than during the coldest and most physically stressful time of the year.

Shorter days and longer nights also reduce the production of serotonin in the brain, giving rise to lethargy and low concentration levels. Conversely, sunlight promotes the release of serotonin, which increases libido and feelings of happiness and well-being. Therefore, the most effective treatment is to get as much sunlight as possible, especially in the early morning. If it is impossible to get outside, use full spectrum bulbs (about 2,500 lux) in the house and keep the blinds up during the day to increase light levels.

Going on holiday to a winter destination or brightly-lit climate, whether skiing or somewhere hot, can be beneficial too. However, the winter blues may return when you get home.

A healthy diet

A diet high in carbohydrates and sweet foods increases serotonin levels, which is why you may crave them during the winter months. However, over-consumption can be accompanied by fatigue and depression. Intake of protein from meat, eggs and

cheese is important, because it increases the production of dopamine and norepinephrine, which promote alertness and motivation.

Some studies have found a daily intake of B vitamins to be beneficial. Whole grains, eggs, green leafy vegetables and berries are high in vitamin B. Other essential dietary requirements include omega-3 from oily fish, vegetables and nuts. Omega-3 speeds up electrochemical signalling between the brain cells and increases the ability to think clearly and retain information.

Hydration

Hydration can also help to alleviate the winter blues. A two percent drop can trigger fatigue and mood changes. The recommended daily intake is between 8 and 10 tall glasses of water. Avoid caffeine and other stimulants, which can keep you awake when you need to sleep.

Dark chocolate

Dark chocolate is another great food for producing a sense of well being. Eating a small bar daily can improve blood and oxygen flow to the brain, which speeds up thinking, concentration and alertness. Dark chocolate contains flavonoids, which are vital to health.

Exercise

Exercise is a great way to beat the winter blues. Evidence suggests that 30 minutes of vigorous exercise three times a week regulates the production of endorphins in the brain, which alleviate stress and depression. Exercising outdoors provides a change of scenery and it increases the opportunity to meet other people.

Milder forms of exercise such as walking can be beneficial too. Just 15 minutes of walking burns about 75 calories, which can prevent a weight gain of up to 4 pounds over the winter months. A good old-fashioned snowball fight, tobogganing, ice skating and making a snowman are other great ways to exercise, keep spirits high and have fun with the family in the fresh air.

Social support

Meeting up with other parents on a regular basis can be one of the best therapies for the winter blues. Having a night out with friends or family, chatting over the telephone, networking online or talking to the neighbours can also put you in a positive, constructive frame of mind.

Relaxation

Relaxation and plenty of rest are important for emotional health, strength and energy. Meditation, yoga and massage therapies can be very effective ways to relieve stress. Even if you don't have the time to treat yourself to a massage or bubble bath, simply cuddling up with your baby or child, sharing a story or DVD together or listening to a favourite piece of music can help you to unwind.

Aim for at least 8 hours sleep and keep bedtime and waking up routines regular. Limit over-sleeping as this can make you feel tired and lethargic during the day. When you get up, a warm shower can help to lift your spirits and prepare you for the day ahead.