

# TO YOUR HEALTH

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## Overcoming the Darkness

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December is the darkest month of the year and the year's darkest day is drawing near. December 21 marks the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere, the shortest day and longest night of 2019. With artificial lighting winter's lack of sunlight doesn't change our lifestyles quite as much as it did in the past. Our bodies, however, definitely notice the change. Researchers are discovering that prolonged darkness can play a role in a surprising variety of physical and mental disorders. It seems that sunlight is essential to humans, provided we can get the right dose on a regular basis.

We're quite familiar with the warnings about too much sunshine increasing the risk of skin cancers. But avoiding sunshine isn't healthy either. Light has been shown to have many positive health effects. For starters, UV rays in sunlight trigger a process in the skin that produces vitamin D. Exposing skin to sunlight may also help to reduce blood pressure, cut the risk of heart attack and stroke, boost immune function and may even prolong life.

Mental health can also suffer during the year's darkest days. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that can lead to loss of energy, lack of interest in enjoyable activities and feelings of hopelessness. SAD can also make you feel cranky most of the day, almost every day. SAD most often starts in late fall and goes away in the spring and summer. Some people call it "winter depression."

Decreased exposure to sunlight during the winter months in New England can lead to lower levels of serotonin, a chemical your body makes that helps regulate mood. Lack of light

also alters the brain's balance of melatonin, a chemical that influences sleep patterns and mood.

Antidepressant medications and counseling (also called psychotherapy) are commonly employed to treat SAD just as they are with other forms of depression. Light therapy (also called phototherapy) can also be quite effective with SAD. When there's a lack of natural light, the brain can be "tricked" into restoring normal rhythms by exposing it to more artificial light. The idea is that dwindling natural light alters the body's circadian rhythms thereby contributing to SAD. Within just a few days, in some cases, phototherapy sessions appear to positively impact levels of the brain chemicals impacted by a lack of natural light.

Light therapy involves sitting in front of special, bright lamps during the day. It must be done with help of a doctor or counselor who knows how to give the therapy. If you're feeling a bit blue there are lots of things you can do on your own to feel better:

**Exercise!** Some people feel better if they exercise. Even if you don't feel like it, try to do something active for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week. Take walks outside during the day, so that you get some sun.

**Seek light!** Make sure you get exposed to as much light as possible. In your bedroom, put a lamp on a timer and have it turn on in the early morning, even before the sun comes out. Consider getting a "dawn-simulating" lamp, which brightens gradually and turns on before the sun comes out.

**Sleep well!** Sleep only long enough to feel rested and then get out of bed. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day. Limit caffeine to morning only. Avoid alcohol. Keep



your bedroom dark, cool, quiet, and free of reminders of work or other things that cause you stress. Solve problems you have before you go to bed. Avoid looking at phones or reading devices ("e-books") that give off "blue" light before bed. This can make it harder to fall asleep.

The evidence is clear that we all benefit from light. At this time of year when we're experiencing the dark and heavy aspects of the season, we seek balance in the light. It's the time of year that we light candles, build fires, and decorate our houses with twinkling lights. There are many ways to add more light to your life. Perhaps you can share that light with a friend. What is the spark inside of you that gives you your light? How can you grow that light? When we shine our light on the world it brings out the light in others, and in a way we all add to the increasing light in the world.

Winter Solstice is not just the shortest day of the year with the least daylight but also the point when light begins to return. Even though the cold winter days are still ahead, the solstice reminds us of the light and the promise of warmer days to come. May we all find ways to bring more light into each others lives.

### **HEALTHY HABITS TO HELP PREVENT FLU**

The single most important thing you can do to prevent the spread of influenza is—**wash your hands!** Rub your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. That is the amount of time it takes to recite the alphabet or to sing the "Happy Birthday" song twice. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers (like Purell) are also quite effective when soap and water isn't handy.



Other tips for staying healthy during cold and flu season:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, then discard the tissue.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

#### **Winter Solstice Haiku by Rachel Dickinson**

**It's dark early as  
we move toward winter  
solstice —  
then, light slowly comes.**



**Wishing you a holiday filled with Health and Happiness.  
Susan, Debbie, Judi, Michelle and Donny**