

Why Am I Gaining Weight This Winter?

By Dr. Tricia Talerico, D.C., M.S., Nutr.

I have heard this question so many times in the past month! People often notice winter weight gain even when they “swear” they’re not eating more and sticking to their workout program. Why? Winter subtly changes our metabolism, hormones, and fuel use, not just calories. Let’s look at some of the reasons why:

1. You move less without even realizing it. Even if you’re still doing your regular gym routine, your non-exercise activity thermogenesis (NEAT) drops in the winter. We walk a little less, do fewer outdoor errands (it’s too cold!), more sitting, less spontaneous movement. This can add up to burning 100-300 calories less per day. So, if we take in the same amount of calories but burn less, this can add up to a gradual fat gain.

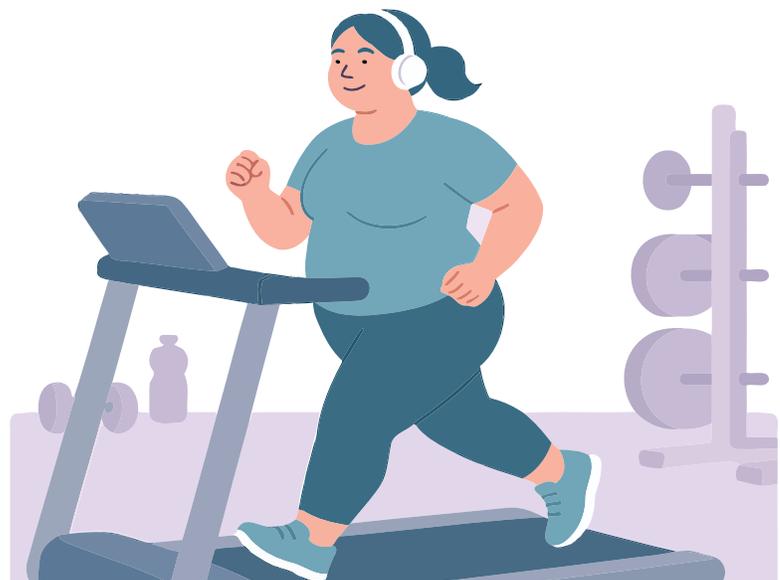
2. Less sunlight alters hormones. Shorter days actually do affect key metabolic hormones. Lower vitamin D

levels can affect insulin sensitivity. Higher melatonin production (because of longer nights and less sunlight) can increase fat storage signals. Lower serotonin levels (also because of reduced sunlight exposure) increase cravings and lowers motivation. This combination of changes can nudge your body toward energy conservation rather than burning.

3. Your metabolism becomes more efficient. Exposure to

cold used to increase calorie burn, but modern winter now means; heated homes, warm clothing, less cold exposure. So, instead of burning extra calories, your body becomes metabolically efficient and well, instead, stores calories (energy).

4. Seasonal insulin sensitivity changes. In winter, many people experience slightly higher insulin sensitivity and a greater tendency to store carbs as fat. This means the



same meal leads to more fat storage especially around the abdomen.

5. Sleep and circadian rhythm shift. Winter often brings more darkness, later waking and fragmented sleep. Poor sleep raises cortisol and ghrelin (hunger hormone) and lowers leptin (satiety hormone). Even without eating more, your body is pushed toward fat preservation.

6. Mild inflammation rises. Cold, less activity and more

indoor time increases systemic inflammation, water retention and causes slower fat oxidation. So, part of “winter weight” is actually fluid, glycogen and inflammatory swelling, not just fat.

7. Your body is biologically wired to store in the winter. From an evolutionary standpoint, winter has always signaled scarcity. Humans still retain increased fat storage signaling, reduced energy expenditure and higher appe-

lite efficiency. Your body doesn't just count calories, it definitely responds to seasonal cues.

So, what can we do? Instead of eating less, let's focus on increased daily steps, morning light exposure, maintain vitamin D levels, slightly increase fiber and protein, add short cold exposure (outdoor walks, cooler rooms) and prioritize sleep.



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