

Dispel the myth-tique!

The truth about the dreaded cold-snap flab starts here...

It's winter: I can't help it! Do you catch yourself making plenty of excuses when winter descends, wreaking havoc with your workouts, your willpower and your weight? It's tempting to blame the season for those sneaky extra kilos, but that's an unfair rap. We debunk the top five winter-weight-gain myths.

MYTH 1 It's natural to store fat in winter – it helps me stay warm

TRUTH
In fact, the opposite is true. 'Fat from excess kilojoules is white adipose tissue, but it's the brown adipose tissue – which is due to genetic programming – that keeps us warm, not the white fat,' says Cape Town registered dietitian Megan Pentz-Kluyts.

Back in the day, we were at risk of famine in winter, says Dr Ahmed Ahmed, consultant gastrointestinal surgeon at Bupa Cromwell Hospital in London. So our bodies are conditioned to store fat to help us survive without food. 'The problem is we no longer need to store fat because we have an abundance of food all year round,' he says.

'Making better food choices in winter and keeping up your exercise regimen will help fuel your metabolism so that you

don't store fat,' says Pentz-Kluyts. 'Increase your intake of vegetables to five portions a day and include more fruit in your diet. Try baked apple with low-fat Greek yoghurt and a tablespoon of mixed nuts; add fruit to your oats; or make dessert with fruit and a dollop of low-fat custard or a pinch of cinnamon.'

MYTH 2 I like exercising outdoors but in winter it's too cold

TRUTH
Where do you live, Russia? Sure, South Africa gets a little frosty in winter, but there's still plenty of sun to go around. This is a pure case of mind over matter.

Anton Slabbert, who runs Anton's Workout Outdoor Lifestyle (AWOL) in Cape Town, says motivation is the foundation of his training. 'Personally, I use winter to train harder and eat well with the incentive of looking good for summer. Also, look at it this way: it's actually easier to train in cooler weather because you have less chance of dehydration and exhaustion.'

Joining an exercise group such as AWOL is helpful because then you have others to answer to and inspire you. 'My clients are motivated by seeing the results of long-term training,' says Slabbert. If you stop exercising in winter, you undo all

those months of hard work. 'Just make sure you warm up for longer in winter, to stimulate muscles and get the blood flowing through the body.'

MYTH 3 I don't eat more than normal in winter but I put on weight anyway

TRUTH
Cold, rainy and dark weather conditions can tend to make us

'crave fatty or sweet carbohydrate-rich food, because it increases serotonin levels,' says Pentz-Kluyts. 'And when serotonin levels rise, we feel less anxiety.'

How, then, can we increase serotonin without also putting on weight? The answer is to make smart carb choices. Choose whole grains, whole fruits, vegetables and legumes, instead of food high in sugar. 'Also remember that while

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MYTH 4 The cold weather makes me hungrier

TRUTH
It's more likely a case of the winter blues than a real appetite spike, says Pentz-Kluyts. And for this you can blame melatonin, the hormone produced when it's dark.

While this hormone is very handy in regulating sleep patterns, body temperature and the release of other hormones, too much of it can disrupt your internal body clock and lead to a depressive mood, oversleeping, the urge to hibernate and cravings for carb-rich foods.

'To perk up your winter mood,' she says, 'give this winning formula a go: eat regular meals. Combine carbs with protein-rich food. Get plenty of sleep. Exercise often and add a good dose of relaxation. It's a simple plan, but effective!'

MYTH 5 The winter weight will just fall off in summer

TRUTH
Not so, says Glen Krog, a personal trainer at Unique Physique in Jo'burg. 'On the contrary, it's actually more difficult to lose fat in summer. The body burns more kilojoules in a cold environment, because it needs to burn more fuel to maintain its optimum operating temperature.' As summer returns, your fuel consumption decreases, leaving you with excess fat that's harder to get rid of, because the body no longer works to maintain its temperature.

Krog gives the following tips for maintaining your weight through winter so as to avoid a mad diet rush when November rolls around:

- Stay as active in winter as you are in summer.
- Keep carbs under 50% of your total kilojoule intake.
- Eat the protein portion of your food first; by the time you get to the carbs, you may eat less of them.