

It's easy enough to say "yes, please" to salad and iced water in summer, when your sundresses (not to mention your bikini) ensure that there's little cover-up provided. Come winter, though, and the foods you passed up without hesitation – the creamy, cheesy ones – are top of your cravings list. What's going on?

## THE WEATHER

Basically, your body's responding to the drop in temperature, says Gugu Mngoma, a dietician at Life Empangeni Private Hospital. "Our need to keep warm makes us reach for hot meals instead of light ones," she points out. Chances are you also increase your coffee and tea intake – beverages which are often laced with sugar or accompanied by a biscuit.

Add to this the fact that putting on your takkies for a morning jog or gym session – seldom a problem in summer – becomes an unpalatable prospect on winter mornings.

Then there's seasonal affect disorder (SAD), a condition caused by lack of exposure to sunlight, which impacts many as the weather turns. Raesa Seedat, registered dietician and spokesperson for the Association of Dietetics in SA, notes that seasonality "is a risk factor for compulsive overeating or bingeing, especially for people who are prone to stress and anxiety. SAD is characterised by episodes of major depression that occur during specific times of the year, usually in winter." Symptoms of the syndrome include increased appetite and weight gain, along with low levels of physical activity.

Discovery Vitality dietician Terry Harris suggests that there are also psychological factors at play. For instance, many of us expect to gain a few kilos during the colder months, so we're more lenient with our diet and exercise. We also spend more time indoors, so we have more access to food – and, with Uber Eats on the phone, who needs to cook? The problem is that take-out foods are usually higher in fats and sugars than homemade ones.

## YOUR BODY

While this is happening, your body's changing too. Prompted by the cold, production of leptin (the hormone which tells us we're full) alters as your body tries to store fat. This is all part of your survival instinct, explains Paula Galvao, founder of Eden Life Clinic.

At the same time, your body's producing less serotonin because there are fewer daylight hours. It's this that causes those carb cravings.

Mngoma adds that our bodies function optimally when the thermometer reaches 37°C. If it's colder than this, our blood feels colder – and since blood's function is to keep us warm and carry nutrients, our instinct is to reach for foods

that will help the process along. Again, it's a survival thing: without those nutrients, your body simply can't function as it should. Meanwhile, your brain's receiving messages to replace the extra kilojoules that are lost as your body burns energy to fight off the cold.

## COMFORT FOOD

How do we compensate for everything that's going on while the mercury plummets? Two words: comfort food. The problem, according to Mngoma, is that unhealthy choices are so readily available: think chips, *koeksisters*, *amagwinya* and cakes. Eat enough of these and you'll train your brain to perceive fatty, sugary, salty foods as a reward, much as a drug addict perceives a hit of cocaine as a reward.

## THE SOLUTIONS

How to break the cycle? First of all, stop the moods which make you reach for those kilojoule-dense foods in the first place. One of the easiest ways to do this is by giving yourself an exercise-induced endorphin rush: try an exercise DVD or use a skipping rope inside if the weather isn't conducive, or try a brisk walk at intervals throughout the day – just 10 minutes can make a massive difference to your well-being.

Mngoma also suggests being mindful of the reason you're reaching for a snack. Before you tuck in, ask yourself whether you're eating because you're hungry – or just bored.

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