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# Wait! What winter weight?

BY LISA WITEPSKI  
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The bad news? The weather – and biology – are conspiring against your summer body. The good news? You can overcome it!



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 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?

### 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. Raeesa 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 call, 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

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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 wellbeing.

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.

**The unexpected helpers**

Before you implement starvation rations, consider these unexpected additions to your diet. They may make small differences which yield big results:

Don't restrict yourself too much. At a time when your body's pretty much in survival mode, eating less may encourage it to put a brake on the processes that cause stored fat to be used as reserve energy. Instead of eating less, eat small, regular meals.

Consider coffee. Caffeine may boost your metabolism, helping to burn kilojoules, because it stimulates your central nervous system. There's a caveat, though: your caffeine should come from tea or coffee instead of sugary, fizzy drinks. Even then, it's best to use low-fat or skimmed milk, and curb the sugar.

**Calcium and Vitamin D:** Your body needs calcium to burn kilojoules efficiently and vitamin D improves the absorption of calcium.

**Limit alcohol:** Yes, a glass of Merlot is an obvious accessory for your night on the couch – but Mngoma warns that excessive alcohol consumption prompts the body to use it as a fuel, instead of burning the kilojoules you've already stored.

**Change your activity:** Harris suggests playing board games or reading instead of eating for entertainment. Turn white fat to brown fat. Galvao explains that while white fat stores energy, brown fat generates heat. If you lose even 1% of this precious store, you could gain as much as 15kg in 10 years, even if you don't change any other aspect of your lifestyle. How do we activate brown fat? By consuming lots of fish oil, garlic, turmeric and red pepper, plus an apple a day (with the skin on).

**Get your melatonin going.** This hormone regulates appetite, but production can be disrupted in winter. Galvao observes that naturally occurring melatonin is more effective than artificial sources like supplements, so spend time in the noontime sunshine, cut out night-time exposure to light (screens are a big culprit) and eat melatonin-rich foods like coriander and cherries.

**Stay hydrated.** This is vital, as the neural pathways for hunger and thirst are very closely linked – so you often tuck into a meal when what you really need is a big glass of water.

**Simple switches**

Seedat says that you don't have to go without comfort foods – just modify them so that you don't carry the evidence of winter-time snacking into summer.

- Instead of loading your hamburger with cheddar, use mozzarella.
- Switch sugary, commercial hot chocolate for homemade cocoa, spiced with cinnamon for extra flavour.
- Bake or grill your food instead of frying.
- Keep the skin on veggies. This way, even potato wedges get an extra nutritional clout.
- Make your own soup instead of using packet varieties, which are often full of additives. This allows you to bulk up on fresh veggies.

Tags: [comfort food](#), [weight gain](#), [winter weather](#), [winter weight](#)



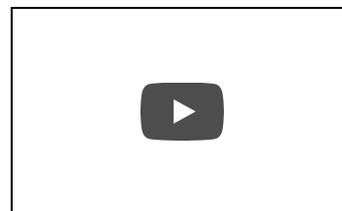
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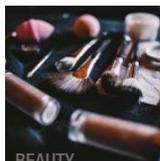
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