BEAT THE WINTER BLUES

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Perhaps the most important principle of training for a runner is to be consistent. All runners have to continue their base-building to maintain a certain level of fitness regardless of the weather conditions. This means running in the COLD. However, exercising safely and comfortably in the cold can be a challenge. Here are some tips to help manage your winter workout.

In order to run safely, you must understand the factors that affect your tolerance to cold. Most conditioned runners have a significant amount of lean body mass (muscle) that provides an advantage in the cold. Muscle generates heat and provides a thermal insulation. A beginner runner or an individual not in running shape may be more at risk for such conditions as frostbite or hypothermia.

Frostbite occurs when your skin temperature drops below approximately 32 degrees Fahrenheit and essentially freezes the superficial tissues of the face, ears, fingers and toes. Symptoms may include pain, burning, numbness, tingling, hard and white skin, or itchy skin.

Hypothermia is more severe and occurs when your core temperature drops significantly from prolonged exposure to cold or moisture. Symptoms of hypothermia may include shivering, goose bumps, lack of coordination, difficulty speaking, stumbling, muscle stiffness, or visual deficits.

A crucial factor in preventing these conditions of cold exposure is proper dress. Too little clothing can prohibit warming up; too much clothing can cause overheating and limitations in movement. You must dress warmly; but also, avoid profuse sweating to prevent shivering, chilling and heat loss. By properly layering your clothing, the heat your body generates is adequately maintained. And, you can easily cool the body by removing layers. It is best to wear synthetic materials - such as polypropylene, Coolmax, Thermax, Drylete - close to your skin as a first layer. This allows your skin to breathe and moisture to dissipate through the clothing. Do not wear any absorbent fabrics, such as cotton, next to the skin because it tends to capture moisture. The outer layer of clothing should always be some sort of a water resistant shell such as a windbreaker or wind pants. If the weather is particularly chilly, a middle thermal layer of fleece or medium weight tights should be worn. Other essential garments include hats, mittens and synthetic socks. Approximately 40% to 50% of body heat can be lost through your head, while fingers and toes receive the smallest blood supply that can lead to a quicker chill.

Lastly, traditional training principles can also be adjusted for the cold weather.

- Cold weather reduces flexibility of muscles; therefore, warming up and cooling down is critical for a safe and effective run.
- Your pace should also adapt to the terrain brought on by cold weather. Ice and snow can make a run dangerous. Keep your pace slower for better stability as it keeps your feet more directly underneath your body.
- End your run with the wind at your back. You'll be less likely to be chilled by your sweat on the return.
- Winter running can dehydrate you. Most runners sweat just as much in the cold as in warmer temperatures. Remember to drink plenty of water at all times.

With proper clothing and minimal exercise adjustments, running in cold weather can be just as beneficial as workouts during your warmer weather training seasons.

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