

# Words about Wellness

UNC DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICAL MEDICINE AND REHABILITATION

## How to Exercise During a Pandemic in Winter



JANUARY 2021 “Words About Wellness” is brought to you by:

**Matthew Harris, PhD, ABPP(CN)**  
Assistant Professor

UNC Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation

I am the only person with a New Year’s resolution to exercise more, right? Waiiiit, I’m not!? Oh, well, in that case, let me try and help you out.

### The Pandemic has Actually Driven us Outdoors

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations for preventing COVID-19 spread call for maintaining a six-foot distance from others in well-ventilated public places, and even greater space in indoors places, in addition to masking. This has led to restrictions on gym access and other indoor exercise classes (e.g. yoga, kickboxing). Because of this, outdoor exercise is more popular than ever before. A 2020 report from the Outdoor Industry Association shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to more Americans taking their workouts outdoors – with running, cycling and hiking leading the charge. Golf and tennis are also good ways to stay active with the right precautions. Swimming can be safe if physical distancing is maintained at an outdoor pool or other body of water, as the risk of transmitting the coronavirus through water appears to be minimal according to health professionals. Yoga and tai chi are also great ways to exercise outdoors. However, as the temperatures dip, you may have a desire to cool off your outdoor workout habit.

### How to Exercise Outside in the Cold Safely

I will discuss some indoor strategies later, but would first like to remind you that, especially in North Carolina, it is still possible to exercise outdoors in the winter. In fact, the colder it is, the more exhilarating it may be to work out outdoors. Am I the only one who likes to run in the cold and pretend they are Bear Grylls going on some sort of survivalist adventure? Oh, I actually am the only one this time? Still, working out outdoors can be plenty safe and comfortable, even in the winter. Here are a few tips:

**1. Dress in moisture-wicking fabrics.** In the cold, the body prioritizes the delivery of blood to your core and organs. This protects us from hypothermia, but keeps blood away from the periphery, increasing the risk of frostbite in the hands, feet, ears and nose. This is especially dangerous in people with existing circulatory issues such as Raynaud’s syndrome. To protect from frostbite and other issues, dressing in multiple layers that you can add or take off may be necessary to stay warm and keep sweating to a minimum. Focus on dressing cold-sensitive areas with moisture-wicking fabrics.

**2. Protect your lungs with a face mask.** According to a 2018 review published in Primary Care Respiratory Medicine, about 1 in 5 people experiences bronchoconstriction – a tightening of the airways – during exercise. That constriction is often at its peak during cold-weather exercise. However, you can reduce the risk and severity of flare-ups by wearing a face mask that covers the nose and mouth. Let’s be honest, you are getting pretty used to wearing a mask anyway, so it might not seem that restrictive to swap your medical mask for a warming one.

# Words about Wellness

UNC DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICAL MEDICINE AND REHABILITATION

---

**3. Avoid strains and sprains in the cold.** Slipping on ice is an easy way to suffer a strain or sprain. Thus, it is highly recommended you use high-traction footwear if it is wet or icy outside. However, you can still get hurt even without slipping, which is why you should warm up before you get going. Cold temperatures can increase the risk of exercise tissue injuries, as reduction in blood supply to the extremities can reduce tissue elasticity and function, increasing the risk for pulls and other injuries. Dedicate at least five minutes of your workout to a gentle warmup, which can include stretching.

**4. Stay hydrated. Cold temperatures** dulls the body's thirst sensation by around 40%, according to research. Additionally, cold, winter air is often dry, so any sweat lost during winter workouts is apt to quickly evaporate and go unnoticed. Try carrying a water bottle or wearing a hands-free hydration pack during your workouts. Otherwise, take extra care to hydrate before and after your workout.

## Or Just Stay Inside to Exercise!

Don't feel like braving the elements? You can still do many of the things you used to do in the gym, in your own home.

- Home workout plans, including videos, have been around for a long time. Nowadays, you can easily get high quality workout tools for free, including from fitness apps and YouTube videos. Some YouTube sites I personally enjoy include FitnessBlender and Pamela Reif, but good resources are everywhere, so find what works for you!
- If you want the benefit of live social interaction to help with motivation, online classes and workout groups are growing in number and popularity. Here is a place to start: [www.cnet.com/health/zoom-workout-classes-to-try](http://www.cnet.com/health/zoom-workout-classes-to-try)
- If you want to exercise, but want a more fun atmosphere, have a virtual Zoom dance party with friends!
- Gardening, vacuuming, or other household chores can also keep you active at home.
- If you schedule your own workouts for a certain day/time, you are more likely to follow through with them. A schedule also helps your life feel less disrupted by the pandemic, and exercise can be built in as part of your day, rather seeming like an "add-on."
- Get the kids involved also! Exercising together is a great way to bond and benefit the whole family.
- In conclusion: get out there (or in there), and work out! We all know how important exercise is, not only for our physical, but also our mental well-being. So, don't let a little cold and a large pandemic get in the way!

Information for this article was mostly sourced from:  
[health.usnews.com/health-news/diet-fitness/fitness/slideshows/steps-to-better-winter-workouts](https://health.usnews.com/health-news/diet-fitness/fitness/slideshows/steps-to-better-winter-workouts)  
and:  
[www.heart.org/en/news/2020/09/29/creative-ways-to-exercise-during-the-pandemic](https://www.heart.org/en/news/2020/09/29/creative-ways-to-exercise-during-the-pandemic)