

## HEALTHY HIBERNATION: THRIVING THROUGH WINTER

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC



Growing up in Western Pennsylvania, it was a truth universally acknowledged that winter was... well, terrible. It was cold, it was dark and dreary, people were sick with colds and flu... what was there to like about it? It wasn't until after college, when I moved to New England (with its even shorter and colder days!), that I finally learned to change my mindset and embrace winter.

So, this month, let's talk about some ways we can not only survive, but THRIVE during the wintertime!

### Strengthen Immunity from the Inside Out

Let's start with the foundation: supporting your immune system. Colds and flu are more prevalent in wintertime because we are indoors more and closer together, and viruses thrive in cold, dry air.

We often talk about immunity as if it's happening "out there," but up to 70-80% of your immune system lives in your gut. The gut lining produces antibodies and works around the clock to keep invaders at bay. Think of your gut as your body's first line of defense, and the foods we eat provide the nourishment to function optimally.

### Winter Superfoods

- **Garlic** contains more than 100 sulfur compounds and has been used as an immune booster for centuries. In our family, at the first sign of a cold we finely chop some garlic, let it sit for 10 minutes (this activates the beneficial allicin compound) and mix with some raw honey. It's pungent, but it seems to help! The science backs this up – studies show garlic can reduce the duration and severity of colds.
- **Mushrooms**, especially shiitake, are rich in beta-glucans, compounds that help strengthen the immune system.
- **Vitamin C** foods like bell peppers, citrus, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts help produce immune cells, as well as shorten the duration and severity of colds.
- **Zinc-rich foods**, such as oysters, beef, lentils, cashews, and pumpkin seeds can strengthen the immune response and prevent viral replication.
- **Fatty fish**, like salmon, sardines, mackerel, and herring, offer EPA and DHA – powerful omega-3s known for lowering inflammation and supporting immune cell function. They also contain vitamin D and zinc, two nutrients often low during the winter.
- **Homemade soup** is one of the most comforting winter wellness habits. Bone broth has been used since ancient times as a remedy for illness and can provide some unique amino acids, such as glutamine, glycine, and proline, as well as minerals that also support the gut lining. Plus, the warmth and hydration can help thin mucus and soothe irritated throats.

### Enjoying Winter (Yes, Really!)

Research shows that people who thrive in winter aren't necessarily living somewhere sunny – they simply have a positive winter mindset. Studies of Scandinavian populations, who experience some of the coldest and darkest winters on earth, reveal that their secret isn't avoiding winter but actively enjoying it.

#### Ways to cultivate it:

- **Get outdoor light**, even for 10 minutes. Morning light especially will help with your circadian rhythm and can improve sleep quality, mood, and energy levels.
- **Try a light box** (10,000 lux) in the morning if you struggle with seasonal mood changes.
- **Embrace Danish hygge** Pronounced (hoo-gah), hygge is all about creating coziness, comfort, and warmth. Think candles, good books, soft blankets, and intimate gatherings with loved ones.
- **Bundle up!** The Scandinavians have a saying: "There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing." Invest in some warm clothes so time outside becomes enjoyable.



## Slow Down!

Just like most animals hibernate or slow down during winter, humans benefit from a rest period as well. Our ancestors naturally slowed their pace during the winter months – there was less daylight for work and the harvest was complete. Changing our mindset from GO, GO, GO to having a period of rest is important... it's not "unproductive."

Some ways we can rest:

- **Pick a week to say no to all extracurricular activities.**
- **Pick a day to let go of all screens.**
- **Dive into slow hobbies (see winter bingo below)**

Winter doesn't have to feel like something we simply endure. With nourishing foods and a positive mindset, we can turn these months into a season of "not so bad after all," and maybe even something to look forward to?!

### ***What will you do to thrive this winter?***

#### **WINTER SLOW LIVING BINGO**

Enjoy checking off cozy, restful activities throughout the season!

Make home-made soup	Read for 20 minutes under a blanket	Try a new tea	Take a slow walk and notice three birds	Light a candle during dinner
Do a 10-minute stretch or yoga	Write in a journal	Bake something simple	Do a puzzle or crossword	Declutter one small drawer
Take a warm bath	Call a friend for a cozy chat	FREE SPACE Fill in your own cozy activity	Try a new fermented food	Sit by a window with morning light
Relax with an adult coloring book	Do a creative hobby like woodworking or knitting	Go to bed early	Make a mug of hot cocoa	Watch the snow fall or the winter sky for five minutes.
Enjoy a screen-free hour	Learn an instrument	Download the Libby App and listen to a FREE audiobook	Learn a new card game or game like Mahjong	Write down three things you're grateful for



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