

Local

Your Health: Energy woes not uncommon come winter

By: Tara Maltman-Just

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An Olympic effort: Brett Wall leaves his opponents in the dust as he races down the snow packed 100-metre snowshoe course at St. John's-Ravenscourt in the 34th annual Kinsmen Winnipeg Winter Games on Saturday afternoon. Winnipeg Jets captain Andrew Ladd dropped by to cheer on the Special Olympics athletes / A4 For coverage of the Winter Olympics in Sochi, see pages B2 -8

The Olympic Winter Games are officially coming to a close. If only our winter could be so short.

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In a recent interview with Winnipeg-born Olympian Clara Hughes, she explained how serving as flag-bearer for the Canadian team in 2010 required training in its own right.

Her trainers supported her body for this task through targeted nutrition and conditioning. They considered flag-bearing to be an athletic undertaking, even for a proven champion.

Here in Winnipeg, our bodies might be acclimatized to the cold, having endured many long, harsh winters. The fact is, regardless of our training, this weather can still take its toll, especially as we move through February. Energy might be at its lowest. We might feel burned out, weaker, and downright low. And unfortunately, we might not all be snowbirds.

So as we make our final push from winter into spring, we can take a cue from Clara, and support our body to its best -- and it's a marathon, not a sprint.

Among the top energy producers in the body are B complex vitamins, which are characteristically depleted with stress. They fuel many energy pathways, also helping to support your mood, metabolism and even relieve leg cramps. If you don't find winter stressful, or have zero stress in your life, then perhaps these aren't for you. Otherwise, and barring any harmful interactions, I recommend taking a B-complex 50 mg twice daily, with food.

Some people will report stomach upset -- even nausea -- when taking these. If that's the case, it might be a sign your body's digestive juices are not adequately doing their job. If so, let your health care practitioner know so you're not wasting your energy on energy-enhancing nutrients that aren't even being absorbed.

There's one nutrient that energizes the heart, enhances memory and focus and increases the availability of oxygen to the cells: carnitine. This is something I consider for patients with concerns related to the brain (depression, brain injuries, memory or dementia) or heart (angina, congestive heart failure, high cholesterol), and especially for those recovering from a stroke.

Carnitine can be deficient in vegetarians, those with low iron, or with lower levels of B vitamins and vitamin C. For my fellow vegetarians, as the highest sources are found in red meat and dairy, I recommend replenishing this nutrient, which is also useful in minimizing wrinkles. Available as l-carnitine or acetyl-l-carnitine, there are non-prescription and prescription forms, the dose of which should be tailored to the individual.

Essential for energy production, magnesium activates over 300 enzymes in the body. It helps our muscle strength and endurance (therefore helping the heart muscle), while also supporting feelings of calm and a restful sleep. It's particularly useful for those dealing with fatigue, muscle cramps, jaw tension (known as TMJ) and stress.

Before supplementation, I suggest factors that deplete its stores first be corrected. Intake of alcohol, caffeine, sugar, trans fats, and even excessive fibre can lead to magnesium deficiencies. Another major culprit is the phosphate in soft drinks. Many medications can deplete it as well, including antibiotics, asthma medications, diuretics and chemotherapy.

If supplementing, choose a highly absorbable form called magnesium glycinate taken at bedtime. It can also minimize constipation because it loosens the stool, a positive side effect if the dose is tailored for you (or diarrhea if it's not).

Aside from targeted nutrients, sound sleep, nutrient-dense whole foods and infusing some fun into each day are critical pieces of supporting your body's energy. Find a way to incorporate one enjoyable activity for 10 to 15 minutes daily, whether it's petting your dog, singing to music, sewing, yoga, prayer and meditation or ignoring social media.

This simple step not only promotes positive endorphins, but takes the burden off of your body to produce stress hormones like cortisol. Since excess cortisol ultimately degrades muscle and impairs our immune system and sleep cycle, you don't want to underestimate the importance of fun to optimal body function.

Let's not let February be synonymous with fatigue, frustration or any other f-word that comes to mind when thinking of winter (neither flurries, frozen nor fed-up).

Instead of hibernating the rest of the winter, 'go for the gold' in the energy event. And like Clara, you might have more to look forward to in the summer season as well.

Articles

No matter how you slice it, it's frigid out there

Tara Maltman-Just is the executive clinician and licensed pharmacist at Vitality Integrative Medicine in Winnipeg.

www.vitalityintegrativemedicine.com

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