Spending time basking in the sun may be more important than you think. Sure, it’s a sensual pleasure and brightens your day. But far beyond that, the summer sun may help you avoid winter depression.

Called seasonal affective disorder (SAD), seasonal depression and mood variation is known to be related to how much sunlight you receive. Now some researchers are concluding that greater exposure to summer sun may help reduce mood problems during the winter months that follow.

A Delicate Balance

Your mood is influenced by a complex web of relationships between sunlight, melatonin (the sleep hormone) and serotonin (the hormone associated with wakefulness and elevated mood). As darkness falls, your melatonin levels naturally increase. And as the morning light emerges, melatonin levels decrease. Serotonin levels increase when you’re exposed to bright light -- a major reason why moods tend to be more elevated during the summer. This hormone is the basis of today’s most popular and successful antidepressant drugs, called selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs). These drugs work by helping naturally produced serotonin stay in the bloodstream longer, keeping your mood and energy levels higher.

Light Therapy: Better Than SSRIs?

It is well known that bright-light therapy can bring quick benefits to people with depression or SAD, because light affects the melatonin-serotonin system and elevates mood.

In fact, some researchers are concluding that light therapy may help to alleviate SAD symptoms faster than antidepressant drugs. In a recent review of clinical trials of light therapy, Dr. Daniel Kripke and his colleagues at the Circadian Pacemaker Laboratory at the University of California, San Diego reported that light therapy benefits not only SAD patients but also people suffering from other forms of depression.

The Summer-Winter Connection

However, few doctors have considered the possibility that sunlight exposure in the summer could impact how you feel months later. This is the subject of research by Dr. Timo Partonen and his colleagues at the University of Helsinki’s National Public Health Institute in Finland.

The critical link seems to be the relationship between summer light and winter levels of vitamin D. Light stimulates the production of cholecalciferol, which the body eventually transforms into vitamin D. The vitamin then helps the body maintain higher levels of serotonin during the winter.

Partonen contends that the amount of serotonin you have in the winter is determined by your exposure to light the previous summer -- and that soaking up more sunlight in the summer will increase your chances of preventing or reducing depression during the winter.

What You Can Do

Next winter doesn’t have to be all gloom. It depends on what you do this summer. While simply slathering on the sunscreen and heading outdoors may be fine, try the following strategies to take best advantage of the summer sun:

Dose up: Get up and out early to enjoy the added hours of morning sunlight. These are also the hours in which the risk of sunburn is lowest. (Avoid dozing during the midday sun.)

Ritual: Practice some form of ritual, meditation, or exercise outdoors for at least 20 minutes each morning. One practice is to face the sun and imagine you are inhaling its light with each in-breath, and that the light is being absorbed throughout your body.

Sun breaks: During your workday, spend coffee breaks or lunch breaks outdoors to increase your exposure each day.

Source: WebMD
Educational Corner: Protect Your Heart in the Heat

Whatever brings you outside — a bike ride with friends, a jog in the park or just a stroll around the block — it’s important to stay safe when the temperature rises.

Tips for heart patients
If you’re a heart patient, older than 50 or overweight, you might need to take special precautions in the heat, according to Gerald Fletcher, M.D., professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic, in Jacksonville, Fla.

Check with your healthcare professional before starting an exercise routine if you are experiencing symptoms or have a specific medical question or chronic disease. Certain heart medications like beta blockers, ace receptor blockers, ace inhibitors, calcium channel blockers and diuretics (which deplete the body of sodium) can exaggerate the body’s response to heat, Fletcher said.

But Fletcher points out that it’s important to keep taking your medications — and taking them when you’re supposed to.

Even if they’re not on medications, older people also need to take precautions in the heat.

“If you’re older than 50, you may not be aware that you’re thirsty,” Fletcher said. “If you’re going to be outside, it’s important to drink water even if you don’t think you need it.”

Tips for everyone
Think you’re ready to brave the heat? Watch the clock and buddy up, Fletcher said. It’s best to avoid the outdoors in the early afternoon (about noon to 3 p.m.) because the sun is usually at its strongest, putting you at higher risk for heat-related illnesses.

Get off on the right foot. You probably sweat the most in your shoes, so choose well-ventilated shoes and look for socks that repel perspiration. Foot powders and antiperspirants can also help with sweat.

Dress for the heat. Wear lightweight, light-colored clothing in breathable fabrics such as cotton, or a synthetic fabric that repels sweat. Add a hat and/or sunglasses.

Drink up. Before you get started, apply a water-resistant sunscreen with at least SPF 15, and reapply it every two hours. Stay hydrated by drinking a few cups of water before, during and after your exercise. Avoid caffeinated or alcoholic beverages.

Take regular breaks. Find some shade or a cool place, stop for a few minutes, hydrate and start again. Whatever you do, don’t throw in the towel, Fletcher said. “Don’t NOT exercise — adapt!”

Symptoms of heat exhaustion:
Headaches, Cool, moist skin, dizziness and light-headedness, Weakness, Nausea and vomiting, Dark urine
If you experience these symptoms, move to a cooler place, stop exercising and cool down immediately by using cool wet cloths, compresses, and fanning. You may need to seek medical attention.

Symptoms of heat stroke:
The symptoms of heatstroke include (call 911 or the local emergency number right away):
Fever (temperature above 104 F); irrational behavior; extreme confusion; dry, hot, and red skin; rapid, shallow breathing; rapid, weak pulse; seizures; unconsciousness.
If you or someone else experience these symptoms, seek medical attention right away.

Source: American Heart Association

Healthy Cooking: Sausage & Quinoa-Stuffed Zucchini

Ingredients:
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
3 links sweet or hot turkey sausage, casings removed
1 small onion, chopped
⅓ cup quinoa
1 cup water
1 cup quartered grape or cherry tomatoes
1 tablespoon chopped fresh marjoram or 1 teaspoon dried
4 medium zucchini
½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
½ teaspoon salt
⅛ cup finely shredded Parmesan cheese

Directions:
1. Heat oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add sausage and onion and cook, breaking the sausage into small pieces, until no longer pink, about 5 minutes. Add quinoa and water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to maintain a simmer, cover and cook, stirring once or twice, until the water is absorbed and the quinoa is tender, 15 to 20 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in tomatoes and marjoram.
2. Meanwhile, cut zucchini in half lengthwise. Cut a thin slice off the bottoms so each half sits flat. Scoop out the pulp, leaving a ⅛-inch shell. (Discard the pulp.) Place the zucchini in a microwave-safe dish and sprinkle with pepper and salt. Cover and microwave on High until tender-crisp, 3 to 4 minutes. Uncover.
3. Position rack in upper third of oven; preheat broiler to high.
4. Transfer zucchini to a broiler-safe pan (or pans). Fill with the quinoa mixture and sprinkle with cheese. Broil on the upper rack until the cheese is melted, about 2 minutes.
National Men’s Health Week

National Men’s Health Week is observed each year leading up to Father’s Day. This week is a reminder for men to take steps to be healthier, but they don’t have to do it alone! Whether it’s your husband, partner, dad, brother, son, or friend you can help support the health and safety of the men in your life.

Set an Example with Healthy Habits
You can support the men in your life by having healthy habits yourself and by making healthy choices. Eat healthy and include a variety of fruits and vegetables every day. Fruits and vegetables have many vitamins and minerals that may help protect you from chronic diseases. Limit foods and drinks high in calories, sugar, salt, fat, and alcohol.

Regular physical activity has many benefits. It can help control your weight, reduce your risk of heart disease and some cancers, and can improve your mental health and mood. Find fun ways to be active together. Adults need 2½ hours of physical activity each week.

Set an example by choosing not to smoke and encourage the men in your life to quit smoking. Quitting smoking has immediate and long-term benefits. You lower your risk for different types of cancer, and don’t expose others to secondhand smoke—which causes health problems. Call your state’s tobacco quit line (for English speakers, call 1-800-QUIT-NOW [1-800-784-8669]; for Spanish speakers, call 1-855-DÉJELO-YA [1-855-335-3569])

Help the men in your life recognize and reduce stress. Physical or emotional tension are often signs of stress. They can be reactions to a situation that causes you to feel threatened or anxious. Learn ways to manage stress including finding support, eating healthy, exercising regularly, and avoiding drugs and alcohol.

Remind Men to Get Regular Checkups
Encourage men to see a doctor or health professional for regular checkups and to learn about their family health history.

Men can prepare for doctor’s visits and learn which preventive tests or screenings they need. Certain diseases and conditions may not have symptoms, so checkups help identify issues early or before they can become a problem.

It’s important for men (and women) to understand their family health history, which is a written or graphic record of the diseases and health conditions present in your family. It is helpful to talk with family members about health history, write this information down, and update it from time to time.

Know the Signs and Symptoms of a Heart Attack
Every 43 seconds someone in the U.S. has a heart attack. Know the signs of a heart attack and if you think you or someone you know is having a heart attack, call 911 immediately. Major signs of a heart attack include:

• Pain or discomfort in the jaw, neck, or back
• Feeling weak, light-headed, or faint
• Chest pain or discomfort
• Pain or discomfort in arms or shoulder
• Shortness of breath

Source: CDC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
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