

Tips for Warm & Well Rounded Winter Training

by: Liz Newbery



Running in the winter - are you crazy????

Actually, I've always found that people who are happiest during the winter months tend to be those who get outside and enjoy the season, whether that be the snow, the ice, or the kind of beauty that a more barren and windswept landscape holds. Comfort in the winter simply involves dressing for the winter. This article will provide a range of tips for being comfortable and safe during your winter training and will also highlight some excellent alternative training activities - some that take place in a gym and some that take place in great piles of snow.

Dressing for Winter Running

Staying warm in winter requires avoiding overheating (sweat=wet=cold), staying hydrated, staying active, and staying well fed. It's good to wear clothing that will wick moisture away from your skin, especially if you plan to be out for longer than 30 minutes. While cotton doesn't necessarily "kill," it holds sweat, which can make you very very cold. Look for 100% polyester, silk, or wool for the layer next to your skin (available at athletic stores, outdoor stores, and workperson's stores). These can take the form of long underwear shirt and pants, running tights, "technical" shirts, polypropylene clothing, or lycra blends. You will also want some kind of a nylon shell that will keep out wind, but let sweat escape. Rain gear is not appropriate as it will hold sweat and make you wet and cold. Side zippers on wind pants and pit zips on wind jackets are a very nice feature, but not necessary. In between your base layer and your shell, you might wear a long sleeve shirt (can be cotton, though not ideal) or light fleece, depending on how cold it is. In extreme cold, I also wear light fleece pants between my base layer and wind pants, or I might add a pair of shorty long johns. Some cold weather boxer shorts come with a nylon panel to improve wind protection. A fleece neck gaiter (my parents call these things "dickies") can be pulled up over the nose and mouth if it's very cold or removed to release body heat. Sunglasses are also important on very sunny days and during longer runs to avoid injuring your eyes with the sharp glare off the snow.

Layering is an effective strategy for a couple of reasons. Firstly, layers give added warmth by trapping warm air. More importantly, though, you can add or remove layers to regulate heat throughout your run. You will want to start your run feeling a little cool (ever see a bunch of underdressed runners jumping up and down in a parking lot waiting for stragglers?). Once you start running you will warm up very quickly - if you were already warm before you started, you will *overheat* very quickly instead. Removing toques and neck gaiters can effectively vent a lot of heat. I always wear a pair of polypropylene glove liners when winter running, and on colder days will add a pair of light fleece mittens and/or nylon/gortex overmitts. It's important to constantly regulate temperature while running, rather than waiting until you are vastly overheated or very cold. Open zippers, remove mittens, shed or add layers, and replace toques with headbands and vice versa throughout your run.

As soon as you stop running, you will cool off very quickly. You will want to change out of wet clothes or get inside before you get chilled. A thermos of tea or hot chocolate left in your car provides a nice post-run treat. I sometimes bring warm sports drink with me while running; hydration in winter is vitally important and drinking ice cold water while running into a driving wind can be less than inspiring. It's also a good idea to plan your run so that you are running into the wind on your way out and have the wind at your back on the way home. Icy roads can lead to injuries, so gauge your decision to run outdoors or exercise indoors accordingly.

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I've only ever had personal experience with frostbite and frostnip during extended temperatures below -30 Celsius. However, frostbite, frostnip, and hypothermia are important issues to be aware of at any temperature, particularly on days with strong winds. It's a good idea to run with a group and to look out for each other. This includes noticing when people get quiet, uncoordinated, erratic, incoherent and start to mumble or exhibit bizarre behaviour (ahem... well, more bizarre than usual). The presence of shivering is not a good guide of cold injuries because shivering stops as hypothermia progresses. If someone is at the stage where they are only just starting to feel cold, dry clothing and some food (even a chunk of chocolate) often does the trick. I've often organized face checks every 15 minutes when out with groups on cold days. It works well when the person in front turns and runs/walks to the back, past every runner or hiker, glancing at each face as they go. Frost nip can creep up - it appears as a whitish waxy spot on the skin ("hey - what's that on your nose??") and should be re-warmed immediately. If cold winter running is your thing, I recommend researching more thoroughly the stages of hypothermia, degrees of frostbite, and the treatments for these injuries, treatments which can vary widely according to the degree of the injury and the proximity to medical help.

Winter Activities Abound

Winter is a great time to experiment with physical activities other than running and biking while staying in shape. Cross country skiing is an excellent cross training activity and is an fabulous cardio workout (although I confess I often somehow find myself just "walking" with skis on...). An afternoon on a toboggan hill bears a striking resemblance to a hill repeat session, but is absolutely more fun. Shovelling snow and skating are both good cardio workouts, and work very different muscles of the body. And hiking in the winter is both a beautiful way to spend an afternoon and a great muscular workout, particularly if you are trudging through deepish snow. The same goes for snowshoeing, downhill skiing and telemark skiing.

Winter is also a great time to work on core conditioning, which can dramatically improve race times and your ability to hold proper technique or posture, even when fatigued. Pilates and other core conditioning programs can help with this. Then there's also yoga, weights, spinning classes and all of the possibilities in your local gym and swimming pool. Putting your road bike on a trainer means that you can bike indoors all winter long as well.

Whatever it is that you choose to do, winter doesn't have to be a time of complete hibernation and can be a great time to develop endurance. I figure since we are blessed with seasons in Canada, we might as well enjoy them all!