

Your health

Q & A



You asked: "I always feel quite sad and withdrawn during the dark winter months. Could taking a vitamin D supplement help me?"



KATHERINE PARDO ANSWERS: "Because vitamin D is made by skin in response to sunlight, many people have low levels in the winter. Our modern lifestyles mean we're inside more than ever and get less sun exposure than ever before: we play inside, travel in cars and work in office buildings. Even when we are outdoors, we cover up with sunscreen which, whilst needed for skin cancer prevention, reduces the production of vitamin D."

Vitamin D plays a vital role in the immune system, acting almost like a light switch in your body that turns on or off genes and processes that your body needs to maintain health. This essential vitamin impacts bone health, muscle function, heart health, memory and much more.

The shorter days and cloudier weather associated with winter can also take its toll on a person's mood, with depression rates soaring during the winter months. Research has shown that vitamin D might play an important role in regulating mood and warding off depression, including seasonal depression that occurs during the colder months. There are numerous receptors for vitamin D found in areas of the brain that are linked to the development of depression and more research is needed to establish exactly how this mechanism may work."

■ **Katherine Pardo is head of nutrition at Nutri Advanced. Visit www.nutriadvanced.co.uk**

Q

You asked: "I often suffer with stress. Is there a calming breathing technique I can try?"



ALISON WARING ANSWERS: "Focus completely on a relaxed exhale. With every out-breath the tension in your body releases and you will begin to feel calmer. The more stressed you become, the faster and more shallow breaths you take. Breathing faster activates and maintains a stress response. To slow down, try the following technique:

- 1) Focus on the out-breath and relax as you exhale effortlessly. Your in-breath will take care of itself.
- 2) Pause at the end of each out-breath for one to two seconds and wait for your body to take the next breath in. Watch your breath breathe itself rather than you breathing your breath.
- 3) Breathe in and out through your nose and down into your abdomen, rather than up into your shoulders.
- 4) Breathe in for the count of four as you slowly look up, and breathe out for the count of six as you look down, bringing your breathing to an ideal six breaths per minute at rest.
- 5) Relax with the feeling of a little bit of air hunger. If focusing on your breath causes you more stress, then take yourself in your mind's eye to your favourite place of relaxation. Scan your body and relax each part in turn to automatically slow your breathing."

■ **Alison Waring is the author of *Breathe with Ease* and clinical director of York Natural Health. Visit www.breathewithease.co.uk**

Q

You asked: "How is gut bacteria linked to obesity?"



GEMMA HURDITCH ANSWERS: "Our 'microbiome' refers to the quantity and types of microorganisms that we harbour. The majority of these microorganisms live in our intestines and influence the rate at which we produce energy from certain foods as well as influencing our brain chemistry, inflammation levels, metabolic and immune responses, all of which contribute to our body weight."

Differences in the gut microbiome of overweight people as compared to lean individuals has led to some significant research in this field. Findings include: C-section birth is a risk factor for obesity and vaginal birth is protective – probably due to the colonisation of bacteria that occurs during and after birth. Infants who live in homes that use standard disinfectants rather than eco-friendly brands are twice as likely to have high levels of bacteria linked to weight gain. Research suggests that probiotic consumption may significantly reduce body weight and body mass index. A particular probiotic strain reduces abdominal visceral fat, a key factor associated with metabolic disorders, which predispose a person to obesity and a range of other health complications.

Based on practice and observation, naturopathic practitioners have long associated a healthy gut with the promotion of good overall health. Modern science is just at the beginning of understanding the hows and whys as well as the far-reaching effects of our microbiome."

■ **Naturopath Gemma Hurditch lectures for CNM (College of Naturopathic Medicine). CNM offers training in a range of natural health therapies. Visit www.naturopathy-uk.com**



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