

Winter weather affects mind and body

Winter is on its way and along with it, all kinds of medical and psychological problems. We know that weather influences arthritis and heart problems and most recently, discovered that it can influence emotional problems and disturbed behavior. It does not in itself cause mental health but does contribute to stress both at home and at work.

Temperature is one of the most important factors. When it is too hot, people seem to get moody and more aggressive. People also tend to stay out longer and drink more alcohol.

On the other hand, rain seems to lead to gloominess and depression. Some of this is due to the fact that people cannot get outdoors and do things as frequently. In places where it is very humid, more people are treated for depression and admitted to mental health hospitals than any other time.

As you might have guessed, sunshine puts people in a positive mood. Just consider the number of Alaskans who leave the state for Hawaii and Mexico for a week or two during winter. One study found that waitresses got bigger tips on sunny days.

Have you heard about positive and negative ions that are

contained in the air? Studies show that negative ions are good for people. They improve mental functioning and mood possibly because they inhibit the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that is linked to pain. Positive ions then have the opposite effect and tend to put people in a bad mood.

Some countries feel that the warm dry winds take the negative ions out of the air and people react more irritably and have more difficulty solving problems. Those countries include the U.S., Switzerland and Israel.

What about storms? People feel good just before a storm. Lightning increases the amount of negative ions in the air and brings your spirits up. Low barometric pressure affects the sinuses. Rising barometric pressure seems to have more influence on the joints. Low pressures also have been linked to anxiety and restlessness.

What about arthritis? There are connections between joint pain and changes in barometric pressure. The higher the pressure, the more the pain. Extreme temperatures add strain to the heart and more people die from heart attacks in winter than any other time.

When the temperature is very low, blood rushes away from the skin to keep the in-

side or interior of the body warm. The heart has to pump harder to keep you warmer all over.

And the reverse is true in the summer when it is very hot and the heart has to work harder to make you sweat.

Weather is the newest element that scientists are looking at when studying moods. Dr. James Rotton, a psychologist in Florida, has been the most vocal in this area in his studies on weather, climate and pollution.

Dr. Rotton says that extremes of heat and cold also affect the body's ability to fight off infections. In warm weather, it is easier to get malaria. Cold weather brings on colds and lung diseases.

I feel that those of us in Alaska are going to see some health problems from sealing up our homes too much to save heating costs. An overly hot and dry house can cause respiratory problems. Continuous exposure to air conditioners for eight hours a day at work causes headaches from the build-up of positive ions. Air conditioners take the negative ions out of the air.

In my office at the University none of the windows can be opened and there is forced air being circulated throughout the building.

What can you do about it? Some people have purchased a device called a "negative ion generator." They claim that it changes the mood of office workers for the better.

It takes about two weeks for your body to adapt from one climate to another. If you go to a warm climate, be sure to drink more non-alcoholic liquids. Runners get sick and dizzy when all too late they realize they have lost too much water. When your body is hot and you drink alcohol, it slows down your ability to cool off and makes things worse.

Overweight people have more problems with the heat while too thin people cannot take the cold. Older people have problems with weather because their cardiovascular systems are less efficient. Men and women seem to respond equally to weather conditions.

In Dr. Rotton's opinion, the ideal temperature is in the low 70's. I like the 50's and 50's with little or no wind. Of course you must remember that he lives in Florida and we live in Alaska.

If the weather were always in the 70's here, there might be four million people here instead of only 400,000. And lots more pollution, cars, and concrete.

In terms of prevention,

Florida psychologists might just be surprised to find how GOOD Alaska's cold weather is for us in the long run. Give me a clean, cold, crisp winter day any time over a hot, smoggy and polluted one.

If the cold weather keeps the other 3,600,000 down south, it's worth putting on the extra sweater for!

Dr. Ted Mala