

Staying Safe while Exercising Outdoors

The beginning of a new year typically includes an uptick in gym memberships and people vowing to try out the newest workout trends as a way to start off the year on the right foot. While some indoor gyms are now open with restrictions in place due to the coronavirus pandemic, many experts agree that the safest way to get your workout in is either at home or outdoors.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), COVID-19 spreads more easily indoors than outdoors, and studies show that people are more likely to be exposed to COVID-19 when they are closer than six feet apart from others for 15 minutes or more. Perhaps you do not yet feel comfortable heading back to a public gym, or you have a health condition that increases your risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19. Whatever the case may be, exercising outside is an easy and safe way to get back into your fitness routine, or even start a new one.

Dr. Ginny Hendricks, an OSF HealthCare family medicine/sports medicine physician, offers tips and advice for staying safe when venturing outside for your workout, which does not necessarily need to consist of running for miles or biking for hours. In fact, you can get in a good outdoors workout right in your front yard.

“Trying to exercise in the middle of the day when it may be warmer and there may be a little less ice formation can be helpful. And then shoveling snow is always a good option – you could shovel the sidewalks on your block or for elderly neighbors and that would also be a good substitution for your usual walk or run outside,” says Dr. Hendricks.

Whatever your workout of choice may be, it is important to pay attention to the outside temperature in addition to checking for snow and ice.

“In terms of weather when you’re exercising outside, wind chill is always a consideration. The weather app on your phone may say it is 35 degrees but if the wind chill says it’s below 15 degrees, for example – that’s a big difference. So be mindful more of the wind chill temperature and modify your exercise accordingly. If you are going to be outside, maybe think about going outside for a shorter duration and try to stay closer to the house so you have the option to go inside and warm up if you do get excessively cold,” Dr. Hendricks explains.

So you checked the weather, there is no wind chill, and you are ready to go. But what should you wear?

“When you are exercising outside – whether it’s shoveling snow or going for a walk or a run – I think wearing layers that you can take off easily is always a good idea. You do want most of your skin covered just in terms of wind protection, so wearing a light pair of gloves, a neck gaiter, a hat to cover your ears, shirts or a scarf to cover your neck are all good ideas,” advises Dr. Hendricks.

“You do want to be slightly chilly when you walk out the door because if you’re feeling warm at the start of your exercise, then as your blood starts to pump and your body temperature rises you are going to get overheated. You don’t want to get too sweaty while you are exercising outside since that can then cool and make you colder.”

While you may prefer an outdoor workout, there are still ways to get creative at home if venturing outside is not an option.

“I think indoor exercise is always an option. While not all of us have the financial resources to go out and buy the newest Peloton bike, there are things you can do in the house such as jumping jacks, squats, lunges, stepping on and off a chair. There are also things you can buy online like exercise bands that you can use in the house,” says Dr. Hendricks.

Most importantly, Dr. Hendricks recommends aiming to have fun with your work out. Get creative while following these safety tips to start the year on a healthy note. Additionally, be sure to check with your primary care physician before starting a new workout regimen.