

Plug that energy drain

January 26 2009, By Julie Deardorff

January makes you want to eat potatoes, drink wine and sleep forever. The days are dark and short, seasonal depression causes fatigue and the couch is often far more inviting than the frigid outdoors.

Doctors can help when your winter energy crisis stems from a medical problem, such as a sluggish thyroid, anemia or diabetes. But for most of us, lifestyle changes are all we need.

"To get more energy, you need to remove what's draining you and replenish it with nourishment from food, natural light, love, supplements and community," Frank Lipman, a New York integrative physician who specializes in treating fatigue, said in an interview.

Find out what's sapping your energy and what you can do to pick up your pace.

DRAIN: Your breakfast.

A bowl of sugary cereal, a doughnut or a bagel might give you a quick burst of energy, but without some protein, you'll be in slow motion before lunch. Carbohydrates -- especially refined carbs -- are broken down very quickly so blood sugar soars and the brain shuts down production of orexin, a neuropeptide responsible for feeling alert, said Tucson personal nutrition coach and author Jack Challem.

BOOST: Eat protein, good fats and some carbohydrates to control blood sugar and avoid getting a burst of glucose. Try scrambled eggs on whole

wheat toast, oatmeal with yogurt and a handful of seeds or an omelet with cheese, tomato and mushrooms. Smoothies with fruit, whey powder and almond milk are also a good option, said Lipman, the author of "Spent" (Simon and Schuster, \$25), a comprehensive guide to ending exhaustion. Instead of using bananas in smoothies, try avocados, he suggests.

DRAIN: Your caffeine addiction.

America's favorite drug can give you that critical afternoon kick in the butt, but so called "energy" drinks and foods actually cause fatigue, anxiety and insomnia, headaches and other symptoms. That's because caffeine doesn't instruct your DNA to make more energy; it tells it to activate your nervous system, a process that expends energy. Caffeine has also been shown to block adenosine receptors; getting enough adenosine during the daytime is a trigger for getting to sleep at night. If you drink a cup of coffee at noon, a quarter cup's worth could still be in your system by midnight.

BOOST: If you can't go cold turkey, limit consumption to three 8-ounce cups of coffee or tea per day (about 200 or 300 milligrams of caffeine), said California registered nurse Nadine Saubers, an expert in fatigue-related illnesses. Try switching to green tea; even though it has caffeine, its health effects outweigh any negatives. Or try ginseng tea for a refreshing pick-me-up. Avoid energy drinks and foods that contain caffeine and sugar; they only mimic the effects of energy. When your energy flags at 3 p.m., try eating a handful of walnuts or almonds instead of getting a coffee. Nuts have a unique combination of protein (for long-term energy release), fiber and healthy fats.

DRAIN: Your shoes.

The human body is built to move. The more you move it, the more

energy it generates. While high heels might look nice, they can also discourage walking around the office, taking an energizing outdoor stroll or walking up the stairs. "Even moderate exercise (30 minutes three times a week of brisk walking) has been shown to increase the number and efficiency of mitochondria to produce energy," said integrative doctor Woodson Merrell, author of "The Source" (Simon and Schuster, \$26). "Exercise is like plugging into the grid -- it creates energy (as long as you don't overdo it.)"

BOOST: Take your shoes off and jump up and down for three minutes. Feel that surge of energy? If you can't part with stilettos, keep a comfortable pair of shoes at your desk. Cole Haan has cute shoes that use Nike technology, and Aerosoles (which can be found at Marshalls) are comfortable and inexpensive. Geox offers "breathable" dress and casual footwear for men, women and kids. Look for shoes with rounded toes rather than pointy. The more material on the sides (surrounding the foot) the better.

DRAIN: Your credit card debt.

Money issues are among life's leading stressors. And stress is a common cause of fatigue. "Stress -- and more importantly, how you perceive it -- is the single most pervasive factor that determines the state of your energy," Merrell wrote in "The Source." Negative thoughts or "monkey mind" -- a brain stuck in overdrive -- can also be draining. Gaining control over your stress levels can "affect a dramatic increase in energy and as a result you will be less likely to get sick," Merrell wrote.

BOOST: In many cultures, breath is energy. If Merrell could only do one thing to increase his energy, it would be this "breath break": Sit up straight, throw your shoulders back and inhale slowly to the count of four, letting the abdomen expand. Pause for one count. Exhale slowly to the count of six, letting the abdomen deflate. Pause for one count.

Repeat four times.

DRAIN: Computer and television monitors. Humans are photosensitive, like leaves on trees. "The bright light of a television or computer may stop our melatonin levels from rising to induce sleep because our body still thinks it is daytime," said Lipman. A lack of shut-eye, of course, is going to leave you feeling zapped.

BOOST: If you're wired but tired at night, turn off your TV at 10 p.m. or earlier; at the same time, turn off your cell phone, handheld devices like BlackBerrys and iPhones and computers. "If you must keep them on, keep them as far away from your head as possible," said Lipman.

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