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Chill Out

Winter activity is enjoyable and good for your health. Grab a sled, lace up your hiking boots or head to the slopes to make the most of this invigorating season.

By Randy Edwards
Ohio Magazine

When Andy Niekamp launched the Dayton Hikers group in August 2009, he figured that the club, like many of us, would succumb to the winter blahs as the hours of available daylight faded.

"The first year I thought, 'when winter comes, things will slow down.' I was afraid we wouldn't have any events at all," recalls Niekamp, the organizer of the all-volunteer club that is hosted on the social networking site Meetup.com. "But I led a hike the first Saturday of January, an easy 3-mile hills and dales hike, and I had 50 people show up. Everyone had been eating a lot over the holidays and feeling cooped up."

Staying active in winter can be fun whether it snows or — like last winter — is unseasonably warm. Outdoor activity can be good for your health, too, says Cheryl Howe, assistant professor in exercise physiology at Ohio University. For example, she says, our body needs sunlight to properly process vitamin D, which has been linked to improved bone and heart health, cancer prevention and a resilient immune system.

"Although people connect going outside in the winter with colds and flu, having sufficient levels of vitamin D from adequate exposure to sunlight can actually boost the immune system enough to ward off things like influenza," she says.

Pollen and other environmental contaminants in the air are typically lower in winter as well. "For those with lung disease or seasonal allergies, winter is a better time to enjoy the outdoors without the unwanted side effects," Howe says.

So whether this winter brings us the deep snows of our youth or the balmy mildness of the winter of 2011-2012, there is no reason to hibernate through it. Pull on your hat and gloves and get outdoors. Here are some suggestions to get started:

Sledding

The iconic winter sport, sledding, is one that both children and adults can easily enjoy. Sledding hills can be found in many parks or back yards. Sleds are inexpensive and when applied to a snow-covered hill, provide hours of entertainment.

In Cincinnati, sometimes called the City of Seven Hills, a hot spot for the youngest set is the gently sloping hill in front of the pavilion at Ault Park. Stanbery Park, on the city's east side, boasts one of the most popular hills for all ages. See cincinnatiiparks.com for directions.

Even in relatively flat northwest Ohio, sledding can be found, thanks to the mound-building park managers at the Metroparks of Toledo. "Up here, where hills are at a premium, our two man-made sledding hills are really popular," says Scott Carpenter, a spokesman for the Metroparks. "And we keep them lighted, so on weeknights when the kids have trouble getting out before dark we stay open until 9 p.m."

The hills are located at Pearson Metropark in Oregon and Side Cut Metropark in Maumee. Both also offer ice skating when conditions permit. See metroparkstoledo.com for directions.

Experts suggest buying a sled with steering control (to avoid crashes), and helmets (because sometimes you can't).

Ski Hill Sports

First, there was downhill skiing. Then the devotees of Shaun White and Ohio's Louie Vito made snowboarding the downhill sport of teenage choice. In recent years, snow tubing has taken ski-hill popularity to new heights among a growing number of families with children.

Last year, despite one of the mildest winters in memory, "we did about 30,000 tubing visits. The year before, it was 40,000," says Greg Fisher, general manager of Mad River Mountain resort in Zanesfield, which offers all three downhill activities. "Tubing makes up about a quarter to a third of our daily visits."

In addition to Mad River (skimadriver.com), Ohioans have easy access to tubing, skiing, and snowboarding at Boston Mills Brandywine (bmbw.com); Clear Fork Resort in Butler (clearforkski.com); Snow Trails in Mansfield (snowtrails.com); and Perfect North Slopes, about 30 minutes from Cincinnati in Lawrenceburg, Indiana (perfectnorth.com).

The advantages of tubing over other downhill pastimes are obvious. Like sledding, no particular skill or training is involved. And the ride can be enjoyed at almost any age. "We've seen smiles on snow tubers from age 2 to age 80!" reads the website description for Polar Blast, the tubing park at Boston Mills Brandywine ski resort in Peninsula. Each tuber is required to ride the chute solo, however, which rules out the

very youngest. Perfect North Slopes and Clear Fork Resort are among those that set aside areas for preschoolers.

Because tube parks are based at ski resorts, they benefit from the lights and snow-making capabilities that ski hills provide — and you can ride moving sidewalks back up to the top.

It's no surprise that snow-making is a major part of the operations budget at any Ohio ski resort. Even during normal winters snowfall is sporadic, but modern, pole-mounted snow guns are capable of creating a 6-inch snowfall in one night, if the temperatures drop to at least 28 degrees and the humidity is right.

Ski resorts are hoping for a colder, snowier winter this year, but they're also finding ways to entice families with affordable learn-to-ski packages, single price "carload nights" and events. Mad River, for example, is promoting family-friendly activities like visits from zoo animals and an ice cream truck on the two long winter weekends of Presidents Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Winter Trail Sports

Some Ohioans may prefer to enjoy their winter sports away from the hustle and bustle of a crowded ski hill. For them, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are the best bets.

"Cross-country skiing gets you on trails and into more isolated settings where you feel closer to nature," explains Jennie Vasarhelyi, chief of interpretation at the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, where there are more than 100 miles of trail available right at the edge of Ohio's Snow Belt.

The park's Winter Sports Center at Kendall Lake in Peninsula rents adult and youth skis and snowshoes and provides instruction on how to use them. Over an average winter, the center greets 4,000 visitors and the numbers are growing, Vasarhelyi says. Beginners can sample the trail that passes by the center's door, or take a short drive to the Towpath Trail, where they can travel miles on level ground.

But call ahead. Check the park's web site at nps.gov/cuva or call 330/657-2752. The center is open weekends (and a few holiday weekdays) and only when there is enough snow (4 to 6 inches). Information about scheduled ski classes can be found in the winter schedule of events at nps.gov/cuva/planyourvisit/events.htm.

Hiking

But we don't need sleds or skis or snowshoes to enjoy the outdoors in winter. Winter hiking can be leisurely or strenuous, offers spectacular scenery when snow and ice coat the trees and rocks, and can be enjoyed with a minimum of preparation or expense.

Niekamp of Dayton Hikers says many new hikers are hitting the trails for the first time through the help of social networking sites like Meetup that bring together people who share a common interest in an event. Dayton Hikers has more than 1,000

members and posts an average of three or four hikes each week year-round. There are dozens of such “meetups” throughout Ohio.

“There are a lot of people who like to hike alone, but hiking can also be a social activity,” Niekamp says. “There is safety and comfort in going into the woods with someone who knows the way. ... They pick up tips from other hikers, see what they wear and what gear they use.”

Local parks provide guided hikes with nature interpretation, and they’re not confined to daylight hours. Getting outdoors at night can add serenity or excitement to a hike, and often open a window into the lives of wildlife we usually don’t see.

A glance at the online program calendar for the Columbus Metro Parks (reservations.metroparks.net/programs/) provides a sampling of these night hikes: The Owls of February, Winter Stargazing, Snow Moon Walk, and Family Night Hike are among the offerings.

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