

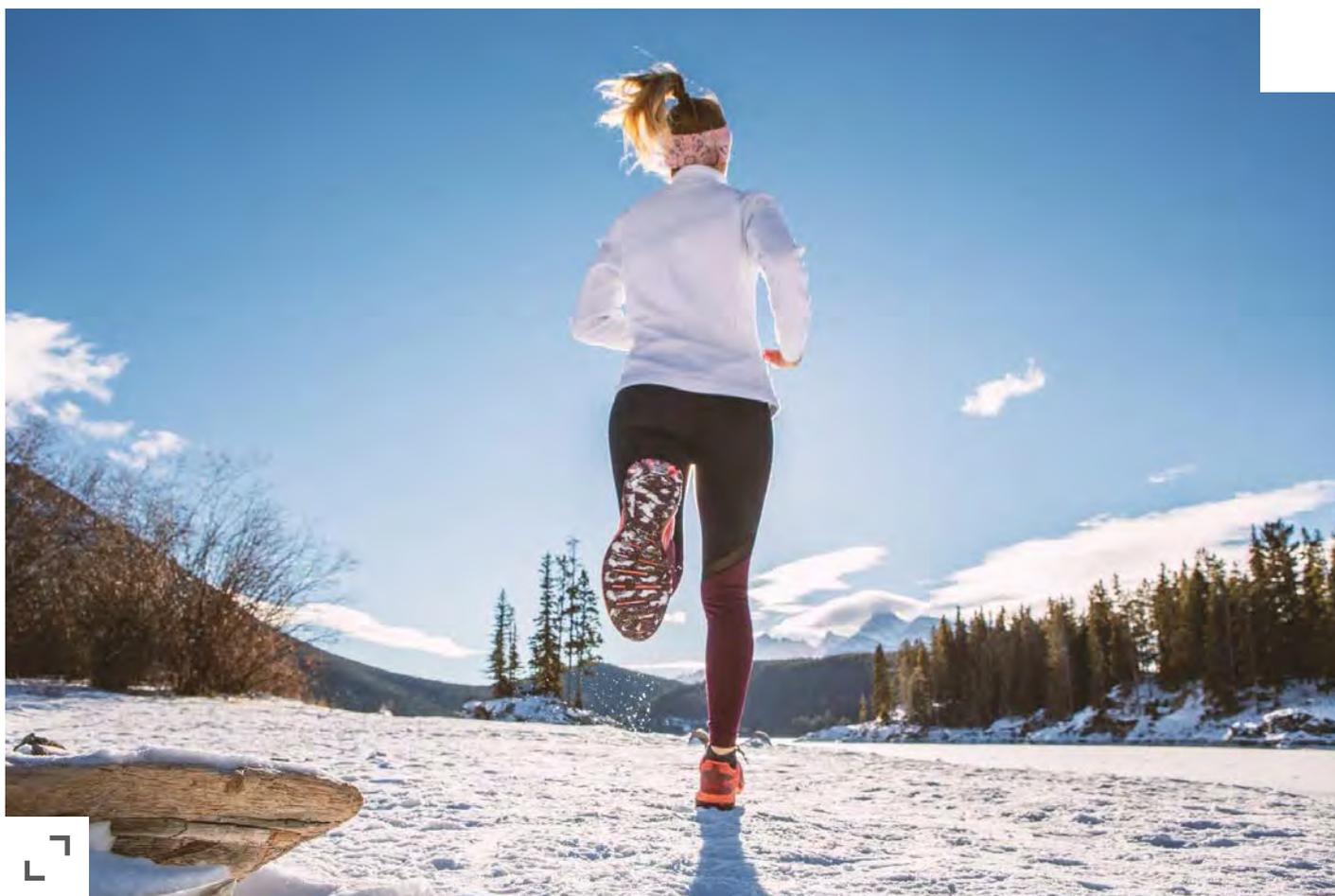
The Benefits of Exercising in Cold Weather — and How to Do It Safely

Ditch your living room sweat sesh and embrace the great outdoors. These expert tips will convince you to take your winter workouts outside — and keep you from freezing.

By **Mary Anderson**

January 26, 2021

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Whether you spend a day hiking the mountain trails or an hour running around your snow-covered neighborhood, winter workouts in the great outdoors can transform your mood and mind.

“We’ve found that people who saw winter as full of opportunity and not a limiting time of year experienced greater well-being: They had more positive emotions, greater life satisfaction, and

greater personal growth,” says [Kari Leibovitz, Ph.D.](#), a health psychologist at Stanford who studied the mental benefits of embracing winter in Norway.

Leibovitz's advice to reap this winter workout benefit — and a handful of others? Prove to yourself you can bundle up and have a good time outside to get a habit going. Here, the other perks of chilly sweat seshes, plus how to get them without freezing your tush off.

The Health Benefits of Outdoor Winter Workouts

The mere act of chilly exercise spurs the body to release a [compound called irisin](#), which increases fat burning while positively enhancing activity in the brain's reward system. “Being active safely in the cold combines two triggers for the release of irisin, exercise and shivering. The muscle contraction of both causes this,” says psychologist [Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.](#), the author of *The Joy of Movement*. “It's safe to assume that an outdoor workout — like a 20-minute run or an outdoor boot camp class—is sufficient to benefit.” And when your irisin levels are elevated, your motivation increases too.

Plus, your body has a mechanism for warming up your core by converting regular body fat — which is inactive in that it just sits there — into what's called brown fat, which is metabolically active and actually burns calories. “Cold-induced activation of brown adipose tissue can occur within two hours of cold exposure,” says [Robert H. Coker, Ph.D.](#), a biology professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. (Experts can't pinpoint whether the lower the temp, the quicker the effect is ignited in that time frame.)

And activation of that brown fat will remain elevated for at least one hour after you come back from that [winter hike](#) or [ski session](#). The net effect is a 5 percent uptick in your total calorie burn for the day. Meanwhile, in a recent study in the [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](#), the combination of cold exposure (a little below freezing) and exercise was found to promote an increase in a certain protein (known as PGC-1-alpha). This helps improve fat oxidation and protect against obesity — after one outing. “We might be able to ‘build up’ PGC-1-alpha over time with regard to cold exposure,” says Coker. “It remains to be seen.” Still, your habit will do you good each outing.

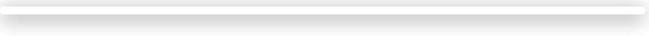
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How to Embrace the Art of Wabi-Sabi

The Japanese design trend embraces imperfection for a nature-inspired, cozy space. Now that's something we can get behind.

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Excellent afternoon out XC skiing with [@meetmaxvt](#), surrounded by a silent beauty. Oh, the gift of being outside on a day like this!
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EVO XC60 skis and boots, @lekiusa poles]

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Not to mention, winter is the ideal climate to [build stamina](#). “I always prefer cold over heat for training,” says elite runner [Mary Cain](#), the New York community manager for the Tracksmith brand. “The heat limits the maximum you can do, but fall and winter are a chance to embrace trying longer distances.” So if your typical run or ride or hike is 30 minutes, build that to 40 or 50 minutes. “They might feel a little better in the cold,” says Cain.

And when it’s snow time, let the switch in your usual terrain inspire — rather than deter — you. “I change things up in winter with [snowshoeing](#),” says Mirna Valerio, an ultrarunner and Merrell athlete who lives in Vermont. “You’re still moving forward, but your body has to work harder to walk — or run if you’re using running snowshoes — through the texture and weight of snow.”

How to Ease into the Chill

Your perception of temperature and how comfortable it feels outside comes from the sensation on your skin. When you hit cold air, your blood vessels constrict in your extremities to try to reduce the amount of heat that you lose to the environment, says John Castellani, Ph.D., a physiologist with the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine. “As you repeatedly get exposed to the cold by making a habit of being outdoors, that constriction response is blunted, which means essentially you might get more blood flow and higher skin temperatures at that same air temperature,” says Castellani. Translation: The more often you head out for a winter workout, the more comfortable it gets and you will become habituated to the cold quicker than those whose only dose is the five-minute dash from door to driveway.

Even if you’re a cold-weather veteran, you’ll want to prep your body for a winter workout by doing some [dynamic stretches](#) or [other warm-ups](#) when you’re still indoors to get a little body heat going. That way, you’ll be ready for action the minute you step outside. And to hedge against having to stop and do a long, cold walk home, make your winter workout an out-and-back, says Castellani. “If you usually do four miles, do a mile out and back a couple of times instead,” he says.



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Art of the Monday morning run

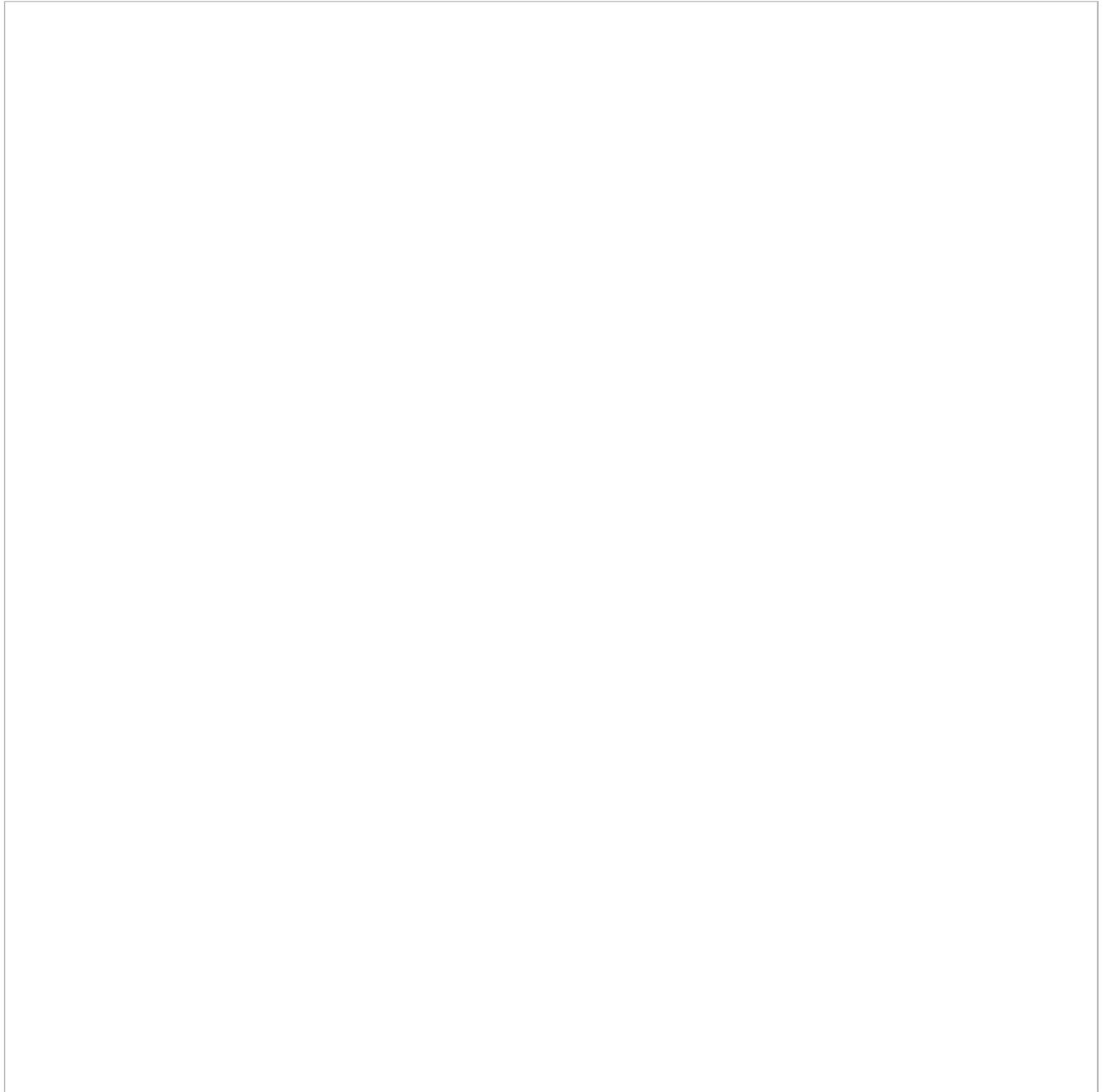
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How to Dress for Your Winter Workouts

Your Apparel

The rule of thumb: Suit up so that you're a little chilly as you set off for that winter workout. "For example, if you are getting active outside in 40- to 50-degree temperatures, a base layer with a light jacket and gloves will likely be comfortable, especially once you warm up," says Laura Zimmerman, the director of apparel and accessories for Merrell.

From there, she says, add an element of warmth for every 10-degree drop in temperature: “Below 40 degrees, add a hat and a warmer jacket or pants. Below 30 degrees, add a mid-layer under a water-resistant jacket. Below 20°F, add a winter shell and heavier coverage on your extremities.” You get the picture. (Related: [How Many Layers Should You Wear During a Winter Run?](#))



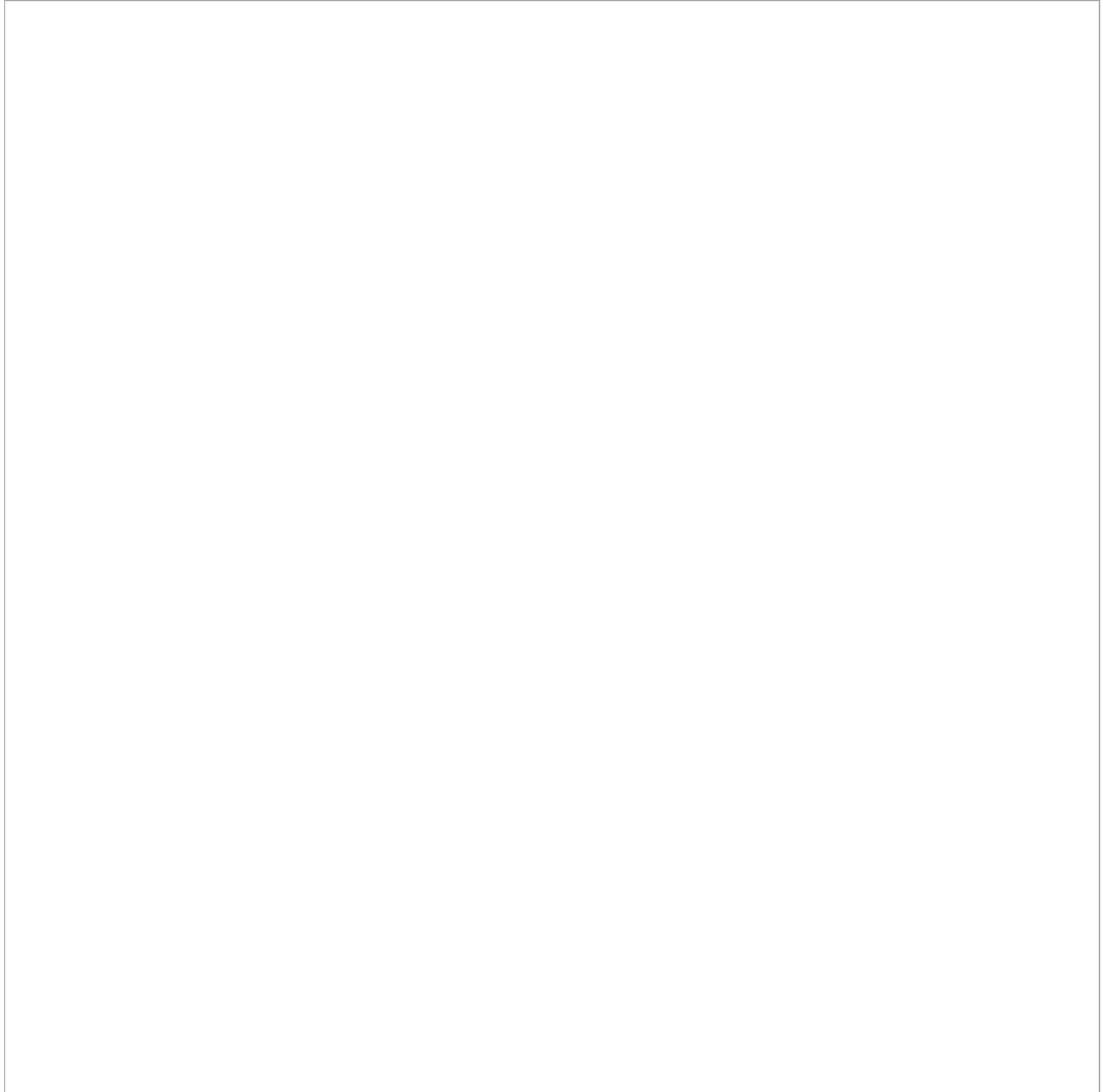
Helly Hansen Tech Crew LS

\$30

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Now, about that base layer. “The most important thing is to have a breathable layer that sits right next to your skin to trap warmth from your body,” says Laura Akita, a product manager for women’s snow and climbing gear at the North Face. “Knits are going to trap warmth better than woven.” Try [Helly Hansen’s Tech Crew LS \(Buy It, \\$30, amazon.com\)](#) for a light layer or [North Face’s Ultra-Warm Poly Crew \(Buy It, \\$80, amazon.com\)](#) for skiing-level warmth — both are breathable, sweat-wicking poly knits. (While you add those tees to your cart, don't forget to [stock up on waffle knit gear](#) too.)



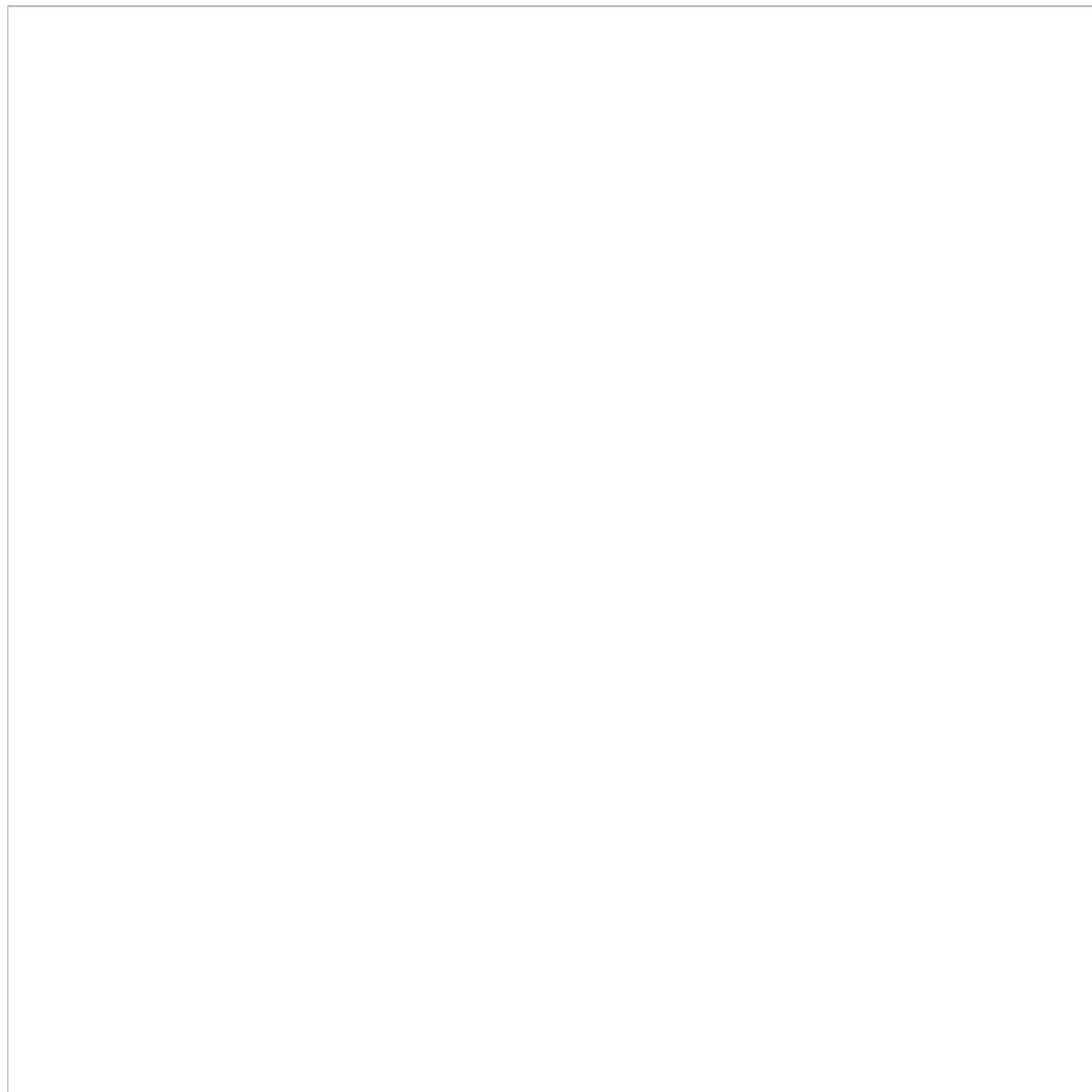
The North Face 50/50 Down Hoodie

\$475

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The North Face

As for your outer layer, the ideal is finding one “that you never have to take off,” says Akita — like a down jacket that can also breathe. [North Face’s 50/50](#) (Buy It, \$475, [thenorthface.com](#)) and [Merrell’s Ridgevent Thermo Jacket](#) (Buy It, \$100, [merrell.com](#)) have breathable strips between down-filled ones to solve the puffer problem. (Related: [The Best Running Jackets for Cold-Weather Workouts, According to Reviews](#))



Mammut Ducan High GTX Women Innovative Technical Hiking Shoe

\$199

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If you're hiking in fair weather, you can keep up their routine with a little gear shift: "Trade up for waterproof hiking boots and water-resistant pants," says ski and hiking guide Holly Walker, a Mammut safety ambassador. Her picks: [Mammut's waterproof Ducan High GTX Women Innovative Technical Hiking Shoe](#) (Buy It, \$199, [amazon.com](#)) and water-repellent, soft-shell [Macun SO pants](#) (Buy It, \$159, [amazon.com](#))

Your Eyes

As you cover up head to toe, remember the other key features that you also need to shield, namely your eyes. "The challenges for eyes in winter include increased brightness and reflected light coming in from multiple directions," says Jim Trick of Marblehead Opticians in Massachusetts. (FYI, [your eyes *can* get sunburned.](#))

For that, your shades need to be similar to those used in sailing: polarized to reduce glare and, most important, wrapping close to your face to block light. "How bright your environment is will also guide you in selecting the best lens color," says Diego de Castro, the senior director of global marketing at Maui Jim. A gray lens will block the most light and keep colors the truest when there's a lot of sun and glare. "They won't block more UV rays than other colors, but they will result in less squinting," says Trick. [Maui Jim's Twin Falls shades](#) (Buy It, \$230, [amazon.com](#)) check all the boxes.

Your Face

For your complexion protection, wear broad-spectrum [sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher](#), covering all exposed skin, including often-forgotten spots like the hairline and ears, says dermatologist Melissa Kanchanapoomi Levin, M.D., a *Shape* Brain Trust member. "Snow reflects up to 80 percent of the sun's UV light, so you're getting the sun rays twice — once from above and second from the reflection," she says.

Shape Magazine, January/February 2021 issue

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