

## Cold comfort: Science justifies winter lethargy

February 16, 2011 | By Melissa Dribben, Inquirer Staff Writer

It is February. You are at one with black bears and bats. Only they don't feel guilty about vegging in the embryonic comfort of bed.

Do not despair, you of sluggish metabolism, who cannot muster the energy to keep up with the Kardashians. Science understands. There may be no cure, but you can at least find sympathy in a good diagnosis.

Over the next few days, temperatures will tickle 60, then drop back into the 30s. For tens of thousands of women, the hiccuping climate is no harmless tease. It is painful.

An estimated 5 percent to 20 percent of women suffer from Raynaud's syndrome, according to Mark Gourley, a rheumatologist with the National Institutes of Health.

Sudden transitions from warm to cold stun their circulatory systems; their blood retreats to their core, abandoning fingers and toes, which promptly swell, go numb, and turn an alarming zombie-ish blue.

Although Raynaud's is associated with serious conditions such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and scleroderma, "in 90 percent of cases, it's benign," Gourley says.

*Benign* in the sense that no extremities fall off at the bus stop.

The syndrome, Gourley says, was identified in 1862. "Maurice Raynaud, a medical student in France, watched people get on the trolley and noticed women's fingers turning color."

A few studies are under way into therapeutic treatments, including one by the drug company Pfizer. Don't get your hopes up.

"Everything under the sun has been tried," says James Edwards, a vascular surgeon and Raynaud's expert in Portland, Ore. "Nothing works."

The afflicted, who are otherwise healthy, can't do much except wear mittens and warm boots.

This is cold comfort to women in Florida who shiver at the prospect of reaching into the freezer case at the Piggly Wiggly for a pint of Edy's. Or college students in Boston, afraid to remove their socks for fear of starting rumors about the Black Plague.

Winter's more serious health threat is hypothermia. And not just for the homeless huddled on steam vents. The NIH warns that the elderly can become dangerously chilled in homes that feel moderately cool, between 60 and 65 degrees.

Only on the brink of spring could any politician justify the cutbacks in the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) outlined in this week's budget proposal - a drastic reduction from \$5.1 billion to \$2.5 billion for fiscal 2012.

So much for the adage: Cold hands, warm heart.

Even by the groundhog's specious calculation, there are at least 41/2 more weeks until it's safe to leave the house in cotton. Meanwhile, you'll continue to grow padded around the middle.

WASPs may summer, but humans of many cultures and socioeconomic groups winter. **The Northern latitude's short days and eternal nights render about 25 percent of everyone moderately inert and moody blue, if not downright depressed, according to the Center for Environmental Therapeutics, a nonprofit research group.** And with parents suspended in a semi-cryogenic state, every school snow day exacerbates the problem.

In a 2003 survey, the ComPsych Corp. found 50 percent of workers felt less productive in winter.

Studies justify our lethargy. Peter Whybrow, author of *The Hibernation Response*, unearthed a 1900 article in the British Medical Journal describing how peasants in northwestern Russia spent half the year sleeping.

"At the first fall of snow, the whole family gathers round the stove, lies down, ceases to wrestle with the problems of human existence, and quietly goes to sleep. Once a day, every one wakes up to eat a piece of hard bread. . . . After six months . . . the family wakes up, shakes itself," and "goes out to see if the grass is growing."

On Groundhog Day, sunrise to sunset lasted 10 hours, 12 minutes, and 14 seconds. But the light there was weak, too morose to cast any warmth or shadow. Which was good news, according to Phil.

Why trust him?

His Punxsutawney handlers claim he's the same prognosticator they've revered for 121 years. Even in the cushiest captivity, the groundhog doesn't live beyond 14. Besides, he's a guy. He has already fallen back to sleep, likely snoring. And keeping his wife up for the next two months, counting down the days until she can cheer up, get out, and see the grass growing.