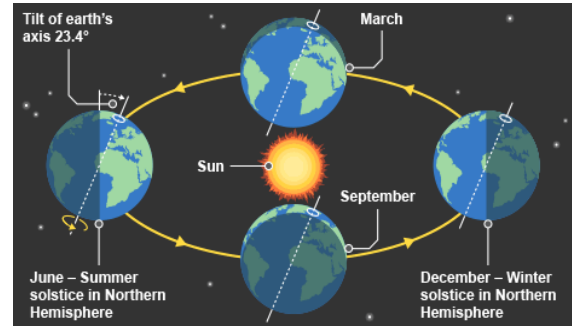


WINTER SOLSTICE

It's the shortest day and the longest night of the year. We consider it the first official day of winter, even though many places have had winter weather for weeks. The sun appears low on the horizon, even in the middle of the day. And the farther north you go, the fewer hours of daylight there are. Alert, Nunavut, the northernmost community in North America, will have no daylight at all.

Some people think that the Solstice occurs when the Earth is farthest from the sun. Actually, it's the tilt of the Earth on its axis that causes the Solstice. When our part of the Earth leans most toward the sun, it's the Summer Solstice. When we are tilted away from the sun, it's the Winter Solstice. In the Northern Hemisphere, the Winter Solstice is usually December 21, 22 or 23.



For thousands of years, people all over the world have celebrated the Winter Solstice. One ancient Roman festival was called Saturnalia. It was a time of much feasting, merrymaking and gift giving. The Norse people celebrated the Yuletide. They would set huge logs on fire and feast until the fires burned out. This could take as long as 12 days. It's no coincidence that even today we light candles, give presents and eat lots of good food at Christmas, Hanukkah and other winter celebrations. They're all reminders of the early Solstice celebrations.

Why has the Winter Solstice always been such an important time? For some early people, it was a celebration of the harvest. Often it was the only time of the year when there was plenty to eat and drink. But many others believed that the longest night of winter marked the rebirth of the sun each year. Now the sun would begin its return to light and warm the earth once more.

Many of us in the North see the Solstice as a sign of cold, dark days ahead. But it also means that, from this point on, the days will gradually get longer, brighter and warmer. Maybe it's wrong to think of the Solstice as the first day of winter. Perhaps it's really the first day of spring.