

# WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T WHEN IT COMES TO AVOIDING COLDS AND FLU.



WITH WINTER COMING, IT'S BEST TO BE PROACTIVE ABOUT AVOIDING COLDS AND FLU. DR. JEFFREY TIEMSTRA HAS SOME TIPS FOR STAYING HEALTHY THIS WINTER, AS WELL AS COMMON MYTHS THAT ARE INEFFECTIVE.

## PROVEN TECHNIQUES

These recommendations have studies showing their effectiveness.

**1 Frequent hand-washing.** Although cold viruses can be transmitted on water droplets through the air by coughing or sneezing, most people get sick by picking up the virus on their hands and then transferring it to their mouth or nose. All through the day we touch contaminated surfaces such as countertops, doorknobs, computer keyboards, other people's hands, etc. Wash your hands, or use hand sanitizer gel or foam, as often as possible through the day, and especially before and after touching

other people. Public restrooms are especially hazardous; after you wash your hands, use a paper towel to turn off the water and turn the doorknob.

**2 Avoid touching your mouth, nose, or face** during the day. Try not to scratch that itch, or use a tissue. If you have to cough or sneeze, do it into the crook of your elbow rather than your hand. This will prevent you from transmitting the germs on your hand to your face, as well as contaminating your hand with your own germs for transmission to others.

**3 Get a flu shot.** The yearly influenza vaccine is designed to protect against the 3-4 strains of flu circulating that season. For many people a mild case of flu is just a bad cold, and studies have shown that people who get the flu vaccine have fewer "colds" each winter. The flu vaccine injection is not a live virus vaccine, so it cannot give you a full-blown case of flu.

**4 Get enough sleep.** Regularly getting less than 7 hours of sleep per night can triple your risk of getting a cold or flu. Chronic sleep deprivation stresses the immune system and can increase susceptibility to a variety of infections, as well as worsen chronic diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes.

**5 Exercise 30-60 minutes 4-5 times per week.** Moderate regular aerobic exercise has been shown to boost the immune system and can lower your risk of colds and flu by 20 – 30%. Caution: extreme exertion can temporarily increase your risk of infection, such as in the 1-2 weeks following a marathon race. So avoid sudden increases in your workout regimen, and if you are new to exercise build up gradually.

## STRATEGIES THAT PROBABLY HELP

Although strong evidence is lacking, there is limited or indirect evidence that these measures will help.

**1 Keep your indoor humidity up.** Heated indoor air in winter can be very dry, which dries out your nasal passages and creates irritation where cold viruses can take hold. Turn your heat down a few degrees and turn on a humidifier, especially while you sleep.

**2 Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables** each and every day, to keep your diet rich in a variety of vitamins and antioxidants that boost your immune system. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables can provide higher vitamin blood levels than what you get from vitamin pills, and provide a much larger number of other nutrients such as antioxidants.

**3 Garlic every day.** Garlic has proven immune system benefits, and limited evidence for cold and flu prevention suggests that daily garlic lowers your risk. Add garlic to soups, stews, and chili, or roast whole cloves with olive oil. Garlic tablets appear to offer similar benefits.

**4 Yogurt with live cultures.** One study showed a lower risk of colds when eaten daily, possibly due to the effect of ingesting “good” bacteria. There may also be some benefit to probiotic supplements that contain these good bacteria.

**5 Manage your stress.** High psychological stress levels impair your immune system and increase your risk of colds and flu. Pace yourself during the holidays, and make time for sleep, exercise, and some true rest and relaxation.

## STRATEGIES THAT DON'T HELP

Studies have shown these steps don't prevent colds and flu.

**1 Daily vitamin C supplements.** Several studies have failed to show any benefit to taking extra vitamin C to prevent colds. The one exception is the marathon runner or arctic explorer: in the recovery phase following extreme physical exertion, extra vitamin C can reduce the risk of illness. There's some debate as to whether extra C helps reduce the length and severity of a cold, but for pure prevention it doesn't help the average person.

**2 Daily zinc supplements.** Like vitamin C, there's some mixed evidence on whether zinc lozenges reduce cold symptoms once you're sick, but it's pretty clear that extra zinc every day won't prevent colds or flu.

**3 Echinacea.** This herb is often recommended for treatment of cold and flu, but daily use for prevention has been shown to be ineffective.



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