

5 WAYS TO STAY COLD- AND FLU-FREE THIS WINTER

Outsmart the viruses that cause coughing, sneezing, and all-around misery

by Trisha Gura

If you think there's no way to avoid at least one cold or the flu this season, think again. Doctors say there *are* ways you and your loved ones can dodge these wintertime viruses that make you sick.

First, it's important to understand the way these upper respiratory infections are spread. Despite what your mother always said (and you may still want to believe), you can't catch a cold by sitting in a draft, going out with wet hair, or not wearing a hat. Colds and flu are transmitted when the viruses that cause them enter the body through the mouth, nose, and eyes.

"Flu viruses tend to spread via tiny droplets of moisture that are released into the air when you cough or sneeze," explains Dominick Iacuzio, an influenza program officer at the National Institutes of Health. While a cold can be spread that way, too, he says, it's more likely to be transmitted through touching, as when someone with a cold rubs her nose and then touches a doorknob or drinking glass that you're unlucky enough to touch next. A sure way to boost your chances of getting socked with a cold: Spend time around kids. The average adult gets about two or three colds a year; a typical child will have six to ten. And studies show that adults with preschool or school-age children tend to get more colds than other adults.

"We're pretty much at the mercy of children, because they're the ones who spread the respiratory viruses," says William Robinson, M.D., professor of infectious disease at Stanford Medical Center in Stanford, CA. He says cold and flu viruses are abundant in classrooms, day-care facilities, and anywhere else that kids come in close contact with one another over an extended period of time. And because youngsters have immature immune systems, they're more susceptible to viruses.

Short of picking the kids off to boarding school for four months and ignoring almost everyone else, what can you do to stay healthy? Here, five simple solutions:

1. Get a shot in the arm.

The best preventive weapon against the flu is a vaccine, doctors say. "Anybody can and should be vaccinated," says Dr. Robinson. (The exception is people who are allergic to eggs, because the vaccine is made with egg proteins.) Since flu viruses change every year, last year's vaccine won't protect you, he adds. Some experts argue that the vaccine isn't necessary for everyone, but all agree that certain groups of people who are either at high risk of infection or might suffer potentially fatal complications from the flu—including senior citizens, health-care workers, and those with chronic conditions such as asthma—should definitely get vaccinated.

The optimal time to get the vaccine is from early October through mid-November, but doctors say being vaccinated in December or January is still better than not at all. There are also antiviral drugs (amantadine and rimantadine) that you can take if you've been in close contact with a flu sufferer.

Don't take flu prevention lightly. While the average cold usually lasts about a week and consists of a stuffy nose, sneezing, and coughing that leaves you feeling lousy, you're still able to function. The flu, on the other hand, causes more severe muscle aches, fatigue, and fever, and can keep you bed-ridden for two weeks or more. It can also lead to pneumonia.

In the future, flu prevention may be as easy as popping a pill. Earlier this year,

scientists tested a new oral antiviral substance in mice and found that it was 100 percent effective at inhibiting multiple strains of influenza. They expect to begin human studies next year.

2. Lather up.

"Both cold and flu viruses are fairly hardy," says Iacuzio. Although some of these invaders can't live outside the body for more than a couple of minutes, others can survive on hands and other surfaces for several hours.

So the most important tools for preventing colds are simple: soap and water. "Hand washing is really the best thing you can do," says Kenneth Polin, M.D., a pediatrician in Chicago. "After all, we pediatricians see lots of sick kids, and we don't get sick a lot. That's because we're constantly washing our hands."

Family members—children, in particular—should get into the routine of washing their hands regularly, but *especially* when they first get home, after using the bathroom, and before eating.

And your hands aren't the only things that should get the clean sweep. During the cold

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THE BEST COLD AND FLU FIGHTERS

Doctors say the age-old advice still stands: Get plenty of rest, and increase your fluid intake. As for over-the-counter cold and flu remedies, although they'll help relieve your headache, fever, cough, or congestion, they won't make the illness go away any sooner. Below, the truth behind some commonly held beliefs:

• **Feed a cold, starve a fever.** Or is it the other way around? Actually, *neither* is correct. The body needs adequate calories to fight both colds and fevers, but you also shouldn't force yourself to eat when you're not hungry.

• **Take lots of vitamin C.** Some studies have shown that high doses (up to 100 times the Recommended Daily

Allowance) can slightly reduce the severity—but not the duration—of cold symptoms. Megadoses (above 1000 mg.) of vitamin C are not harmless, however. They can cause diarrhea and interfere with mineral absorption. You may be better off getting your vitamin C naturally by drinking plenty of fruit juices, which will also give your body the extra fluid it needs.

• **Have chicken soup.** Grandmothers have touted its medicinal powers for decades. And while drinking *any* hot liquid will help make it easier to cough up mucus and clear nasal congestion, it turns out that researchers have identified substances in chicken soup that may help reduce inflammation and

make mucus easier to expel.

• **Avoid dairy products.** Don't bother. While it's long been believed that you shouldn't drink milk when you've got a cold because it creates more mucus, researchers tested this theory and found no evidence to support it. But because milk coats the mouth and throat, it creates the *sensation* of increased mucus.

• **Pop zinc throat lozenges.** It may be worth a try: A recent study by researchers at the Cleveland Clinic revealed that cold sufferers who popped zinc gluconate lozenges every two hours were able to cut the duration of their cold symptoms in half. But 80 percent of the participants who took them complained of an unpleasant aftertaste.



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3. Hands off!

Of course, it's impossible to wipe off everything before you touch it, so even the cleanest clean freak is likely to pick up a few germs in the course of a normal day. But that alone won't guarantee you'll get sick. "It's when someone gets the virus on his hands and then touches his mouth or eyes that a cold is spread," says Michael Macknin, M.D., chairman of the department of general pediatrics at the Cleveland Clinic.

So every time you touch your face—say, to scratch your nose or rub your eye—you're giving viruses a clear shot at infecting you. Try to make a conscious effort to keep your hands away from your face, and teach your chil-

dren to do the same. "You'll be surprised at how often you touch your face without even thinking about it," says Dr. Macknin.

4. Practice solitary confinement.

If someone in the family does get sick, the best thing to do is to keep him or her away from other family members as much as possible—especially during the most contagious point. "Usually, you carry the most virus in your nose early in the infection," says Dr. Robinson. "For each day of illness, the amount of virus drops. So the first day you're more contagious than the second. By the third or fourth day you're still contagious, but there's a much smaller chance that you'll infect someone else."

If your children are in day care, make sure the facility has thorough infection-control procedures. But experts say the

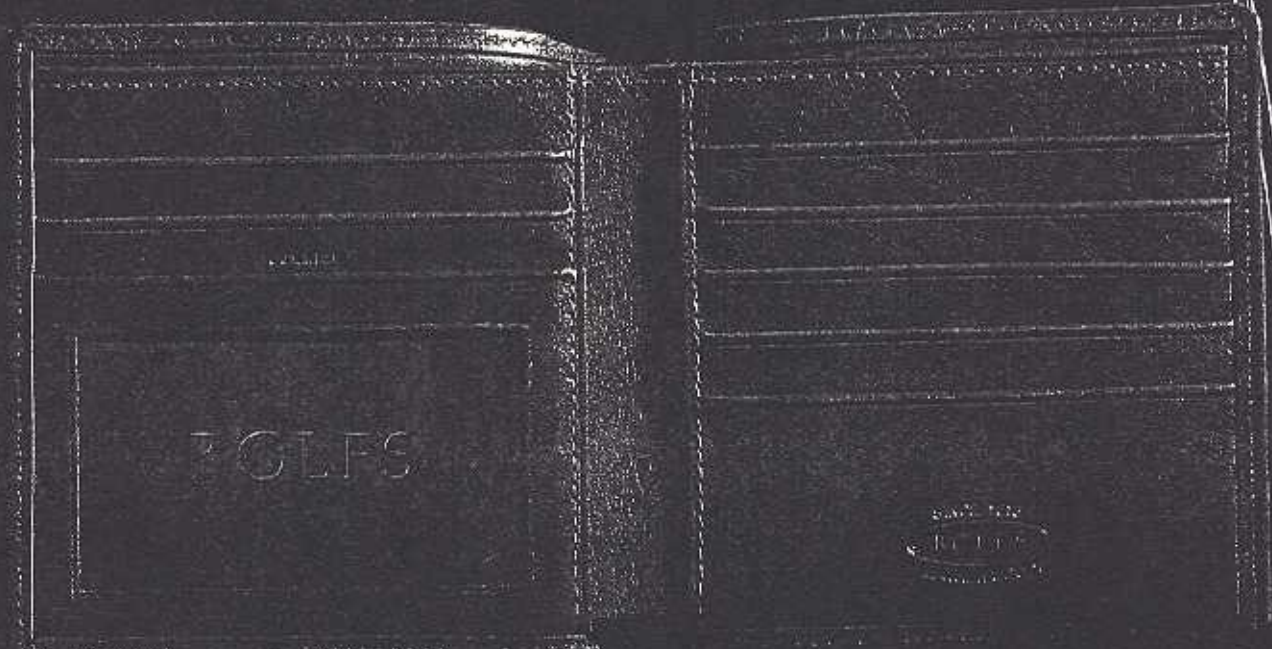
best way to keep day-care kids healthy is for parents to keep sick children at home. "I use a ton of wipes and wash my hands constantly, but when a kid shows up sick, I can usually depend on everybody else getting it," says Suzanne Marshall, a home-care provider in Cleveland.

5. Use home remedies.

Healthy habits can go a long way in cold-proofing you and your family this winter. That includes getting adequate sleep and eating balanced meals with plenty of fruits, vegetables, protein, and whole grains. Both can help keep your immune system working properly.

Since the circulation of fresh air can reduce cold viruses, be sure your house is well ventilated. Also, a reduced heating bill isn't the only reason to lower your home's thermostat. Experts say cooler air carries fewer cold viruses. ★

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