

10 Easy Steps to Help Prevent Colds and Flu

Ways To Enhance The Effectiveness Of The Flu Shot.

Taking early steps to protect against cold and flu through diet and lifestyle can help the flu shot fight seasonal viruses. Here are 10 simple preventative measures to boost immunity.

"The time to protect yourself is now - before the peak of the cold and flu season in January and February," says Simin Nikbin Meydani, DVM, PhD, director of the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts and its Nutritional Immunology Laboratory. "Better yet, getting your immune system prepared is best done if you create a year-round routine. Since our immune system weakens with age, it's even more important for older adults to take preventive measures."

Infections can be more serious than just a case of the sniffles. The common cold, most often caused by rhinoviruses, is the leading cause of workplace absences. Complications of a cold can include bronchitis, strep throat and pneumonia. Most Americans get one to three colds a year, with infections most common in winter and spring when people spend more time close together indoors. (Most research suggests, however, that it's not true that exposure to cold temperatures increases your risk.)

Influenza, popularly known as the flu, is even more seasonal and potentially serious. Although the timing of flu season varies from year to year, typically it begins in November and lasts until March. Each season, between 5% and 20% of Americans will get the flu, with about 200,000 sick enough to be hospitalized, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

November might still seem far off, but keep in mind that it takes two weeks after getting the annual flu vaccine for an adult to develop antibodies against the disease. That's why getting your flu shot is step number-one Meydani recommends in her 10-step prescription to reduce your risk and boost your immune system:

1. Get a flu vaccine.

"The good news is 70% of older adults do get a shot, but let's work on getting that figure closer to 100%," Meydani says. "The not-so-good news is that no flu vaccine is 100% effective; in a typical year it has a 40% efficacy rate. But don't let that statistic or any media reports stop you from getting immunized - if you have reservations, talk to your physician." Studies also show the vaccine will reduce your risk of flu-related hospitalization.

2. Eat more fruits and vegetables to strengthen your immune system.

The antioxidants, vitamins and minerals that come with eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables every day can help strengthen your immune system to better fight off infections. Meydani says, "Ironically, people often eat less fruit in the winter when the availability of local fresh products decreases."

But don't let supermarket availability of fresh fruits and vegetables keep you from consuming plenty of produce. Research has shown that frozen fruits and vegetables, typically picked at the peak of ripeness and nutritional content, are at least as good for you as fresh. Keep your freezer stocked with easy-to-use bags of berries to make smoothies or stir into your hot oatmeal, and veggies to add to stews, soups, casseroles and stir-fry dishes. Meydani recommends preparing a weekly batch of vegetable-rich soup, which has the added benefit of warming you up as the temperatures drop.

Canned fruits and vegetables can also be good cold-weather alternatives, but make sure to seek out fruits canned in juice without added sugar and veggies low in sodium. Canned beans of all types are especially nutritious and convenient; drain and rinse to minimize sodium content before using.

3. Walking boosts immunity.

One study of more than 1,000 people of all ages found those who walked at least 20 minutes a day, five times a week, had 43% fewer sick days than others who exercised one day or less a week. The study also found that when the people who walked this moderate amount each week did get sick, their symptoms were milder and the cold or flu lasted for a shorter period.

"Don't limit your walking routine to flu season," Meydani advises. "It will be more effective if you make this a year-round practice. Invest in warm clothing and comfortable boots to extend your walking season as it gets colder. Use every opportunity to walk and climb the stairs indoors. Find a walking partner!"

4. Vitamin E key for strong immunity.

This antioxidant vitamin is effective in building up the immune system. In a study at the HNRCA, researchers found that vitamin E improves the human body's response to the flu vaccine and reduces the risk of upper respiratory infections. You can get vitamin E in foods such as wheat germ, nuts, sunflower seeds, leafy greens, olives and liquid vegetable oils.

5. Consume foods rich in zinc.

Research suggests there are benefits to adding zinc to your anti-infection routine, Meydani says. (See "Extra Zinc Boosts Immune System in Older Adults" in the May newsletter.) Zinc is found in high-protein foods such as the dark meat of chicken or turkey, lamb and pork. Good plant sources include nuts and seeds, legumes and whole grains. Zinc is also found in fortified breakfast cereals and is common in multivitamins. Don't overdo it with supplements, however - too much zinc (the upper limit for adults is 40 milligrams a day) can be harmful.

What about vitamin C, popularly touted for its infection-fighting abilities? "While Vitamin C is often cited as a panacea for colds and flus, the science doesn't support this claim," says Meydani. Researchers who reviewed 30 clinical trials determined that taking vitamin C supplements doesn't prevent colds, though there is some evidence it may shorten the duration of illness.

6. Lose weight and boost immunity.

Studies have shown that when people with excess weight reduce their calorie intake for six months and lose belly fat, their immune response is strengthened. Best results were seen when cutting calories by 30%, but even a 10% reduction was shown to be beneficial.

Meydani cautions, "This practice should be used only by people who have excess weight, and then you need to be careful not to reduce in a way that creates nutritional deficiencies."

7. Health benefits of drinking more fluids.

"Especially water, but also consider drinking green tea, which contains antioxidants that will help reduce inflammation, or get more adventurous and try turmeric tea," Meydani says. When aiming for enough water or other non-sugary fluids daily, keep in mind that the fluid in soups, fruits, vegetables, tea, coffee and other foods also counts.

8. Washing hands to eliminate germs.

Cold and flu germs often come from contaminated surfaces or from touching other people and can be countered by frequently washing your hands with warm water and soap. When washing, rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds to eliminate germs - and don't forget to clean under your nails. (See box.) It's also wise to avoid rubbing your eyes and nose or covering your mouth with your hands.

9. Effect of sleep on immunity.

Sleep is an important natural remedy to protect against colds and flu. University of Washington scientists have linked a brain-specific protein associated with sleep to the ability to fight off symptoms of the flu. Older adults should get seven to eight hours of sleep each night to support a healthy immune system, according to other research published in the journal *Sleep*.

10. Symptoms of weakened immunity.

"Most people know when they are getting rundown or taking on more stress than is good for the immune system. Watch for the signs and take action," Meydani advises. "Reflect on your wellness regularly and take action on your own or with the assistance of a health-care professional." The other 9 steps in this article are a good start.

Nothing can protect you completely against seasonal infections, of course, but these tips should improve your odds.

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