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15 Easy Ways to Beat a Cold

BY LISA FIELDS

WHEN DAYS GET SHORTER and temperatures drop, you probably brace yourself for the inevitable common cold. And with good reason: Europeans get two to five colds per year, according to research from the Common Cold Centre at Cardiff University in Wales. But you don't have to be a statistic.

"For everyone who has a cold, there could be two or three people who are harboring a virus who never get sick," says Ron ➔

Eccles, director of the Common Cold Centre. For these lucky people the virus triggers their immune system to produce antibodies that throw off the virus.

Strengthen your body's defenses against viruses by taking these simple steps this winter season. If you're already coughing and sneezing, you can shorten the duration or minimize symptoms. Here's how:

1 Wash your hands often.

Cleaning hands frequently can ward off colds more effectively than any other measure. To be completely clean and virus-free, hands should be washed with soap for a minimum of 15 seconds.

When sick people cough and sneeze, tiny droplets sprinkle surfaces with cold viruses. You pick up viruses when you touch those surfaces. If you touch your face before washing your hands, the germs enter your system.

"That's how you catch a lot of colds; you bring your fingers to your nose or rub your eyes," says Chuck Gerba, microbiology professor at the University of Arizona. "Adults touch their faces about 16 times an hour."

2 Slather on sanitizer.

If you don't have access to soap and water, hand sanitizer can help you de-bug.

"Hand sanitizers are pretty much equal to hand-washing to prevent colds," Gerba says. "You reduce your risk of getting a cold by 30 to 50 percent.

And we have new data that even if the hands are visibly dirty, the hand sanitizer will be just as effective."

Don't just rely on sanitizer before you're about to eat; use it when you've touched the copy machine at work or a bus handrail.

"Viruses spread like lightning through office buildings, homes and mass transit," Gerba says. "We did the study to show that hand sanitizer is effective; it dropped the spread by 90%."

3 Tempt your tastebuds.

When you've got a scratchy throat and runny nose, fight back with hot, tasty, fruit-flavored cordials (concentrated fruit juice) or a honey and lemon drink

"They'll provide great relief from sore throat and cough," Eccles says. "It promotes the production of saliva and makes your nose run a little bit."

Not all hot beverages achieve this effect. "Tea and coffee are not the same, because they're not as tasty," Eccles says. "The more powerful the flavor, the better."

4 Warm your sniffer.

When it's cold outside, you bundle up in a coat and hat, but your nose isn't protected from the elements. Exposing it to chilly temperatures lowers your resistance to viruses that are present in your nasal passages.

It does increase the chance of infection, Eccles says. "You can show a direct relationship between colds and flu

and temperature. The colder it gets, the more colds and flu we get."

Covering your nose and mouth with a scarf is the simplest solution.

"The scarf will act like a heat exchange," Eccles says. "The air reaching your nose will be warmed from your mouth."

5 Keep toes toasty.

Research suggests that chilled feet can lower your resistance to cold viruses.

Researchers at the Common Cold Centre divided seemingly healthy people into two groups, believing that some would be harboring cold viruses. Half had their feet dipped into frigid water and that group developed significantly more colds.

"Chilling of any part of the body can do this, but the feet seem to be particularly sensitive," Eccles says. "It's weakening our defenses and letting the virus trigger symptoms."

6 Avoid antibiotics.

Many people mistakenly believe that they should take antibiotics for colds. Not only are they ineffective against cold viruses, they can cause future problems.

"When we unnecessarily take antibiotics for them, there's an increasing chance of bacteria that we're trying to treat becoming resistant to antibiotics in individuals," says Dr. Pasi Penttinen of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in Stockholm.

"We are seeing the emergence of bacteria that are resistant to last-line antibiotics, which severely limits treatment options. It's one of the biggest public health threats in Europe and globally."

7 Depend on over-the-counter relief.

The most effective medication to soothe a cold might surprise you: Over-the-counter painkillers like paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen.

"Most people don't think of it, but they treat sore throat pain, sinus pain, muscle aches and pains, chills, fever and headaches," Eccles says.

Nearly as effective: Nasal sprays containing decongestants like xylometazoline or oxymetazoline, which can relieve stuffy noses for 10 to 12 hours.

"Decongestant tablets are only one-fifth as effective, and they don't last as long," Eccles says.

8 Curl up in bed.

Many studies have found a connection between sleep deprivation and a higher incidence of colds. When you're tired, it's harder to work efficiently. That's how your immune system feels when it has to fight off viruses without ample rest.

"Sleep deprivation is a big problem in Western countries," Penttinen says. "The strongest defense against colds is the body's own immune-defense system. Healthy lifestyles across the board—including sleeping enough—are a good way of keeping defenses up."

9 Do your D.

Some studies suggest that vitamin D supplements may help to prevent colds during winter, although more research is needed. People produce vitamin D when the skin is exposed to sunlight, but in winter, people are exposed to sunlight less often. Ask your doctor whether you should supplement with D, particularly if you do not eat dietary sources such as oily fish, eggs, fortified spreads and breakfast cereals.

"There is evidence, but it's not proven," Eccles says. "I take a vitamin D tablet. It's my placebo at the moment. It's certainly worth a try, and it won't do you any harm." He takes 25mcg. [For editions using International Units, this converts to 1,000 IU.]

10 Go sparingly on herbs.

Many people reach for echinacea or zinc to prevent or shorten the duration of colds. But studies have shown conflicting results. Some research has found that zinc may shorten the duration of a cold, although the evidence isn't overwhelming. But a recent review of echinacea studies found little evidence that it has an effect on colds, says study author Dr. Marlies Karsch-Völk of the Institute of General Practice at Technical University in Munich.

"There are a lot of studies about it, but they're not very well performed, so we cannot draw a strong conclusion," she says. "We cannot say that there is no effect; this is just about what we know."

11 Clean mildly.

Don't fight an all-out war on germs during cold season, even if someone in your home is sick. When wiping down surfaces, use plain soap; antibacterial soaps are overkill.

"If somebody in the house has a cough or cold, cleaning with a neutral detergent and a cloth will be sufficient to stop any spread," says Dr. Nuala O'Connor, lead advisor on antibiotic resistance for the Irish College of General Practitioners. "The physical rubbing will actually reduce the amount of virus on a surface. If we use too many disinfectants, we're going to encourage the development of resistant organisms."

12 Go green (tea).

An amino acid in green tea has been linked with cold prevention. American researchers have found in a 2007 study that the compound, called L-theanine, helps to prevent the incidence of colds and makes symptoms less severe among cold sufferers, according to a study in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*. "It is unusual for a food supplement to reduce the incidence of cold and flu," says study author Susan S. Percival, professor and chair of the department of food science and human nutrition at the University of Florida. "This was a fairly high amount given—it was equivalent to eight to ten cups of tea a day."

You can take L-theanine supplements, but you may glean the same

benefits from sipping strongly brewed green tea throughout the day: A German study published in *The Journal of Nutrition* found that L-theanine levels increased significantly in healthy adults whether they drank green tea or took supplements.

13 Lock lips with confidence.

You might be inclined to avoid kissing your partner when one of you has a cold, but studies conducted over several decades have shown that kissing doesn't transmit cold viruses. Although they're present in the tiny droplets that leave the nose and mouth during sneezes and coughs, your mouth doesn't harbor viruses when you aren't forcefully coughing. To kiss a sniffly partner with confidence, plant one firmly on his or her mouth, rather than pecking the cheek.

"You have to kiss on the lips because the other person may have touched their face with cold viruses on their hands," Gerba says.

14 Behold the power of seaweed.

Nasal spray derived from red seaweed may help to shorten the duration of your cold.

"Sea water contains the highest concentration of viruses of any natural product, even soil," Eccles says. "A lot of organisms in the sea have developed antiviral mechanisms to prevent viruses from infecting them. Seaweed

may have antiviral properties that we can harness to treat ourselves."

Look for nasal sprays with the words "carrageenan" or "red seaweed" on the box. [EDITORS: According to manufacturers Boehringer Ingelheim, it's sold in Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal under the brand name Bisolviral, and in France under the name Surbroncviral, in the Slovak Republic under Mucoviral.] Eating seaweed or foods containing carrageenan (an additive used to thicken beverages and ice cream) won't have an effect on colds, Eccles says.

15 Scoop up yogurt.

You may know people who eat probiotic-containing yogurt to improve the regularity of their digestive systems. Probiotics—live microorganisms, including specific beneficial bacteria, that provide health benefits when eaten—also help immune function, and researchers have found that consuming probiotics regularly can keep colds at bay. A recent review of ten studies by Korean researchers found that eating yogurt with probiotics for up to three months can help to ward off colds during cold and flu season.

"It does not seem to be necessary to eat it every single day of the year—just during cold season," Karsch-Völk says. *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* species are the most common microorganisms found in yogurt. ■