



ASHEVILLE INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE

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Cold and Sinus Relief

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Sore or scratchy throat, runny or stuffy nose, cough, sneezing, and all-over blahs and achiness? Have you had a winter cold yet? Each year in the United States children will get an average of 6 to 8 colds, and adults 2 to 4. The common cold, caused by two hundred different virus strains, is the most frequent acute illness in the world. Colds are not a serious medical problem, but can give us 7 to 10 days of not feeling so great. Occasionally, common colds are complicated by bacterial superinfection—such as sinusitis or otitis media and bronchitis. But a little knowledge might keep you from having to suffer even one cold. Staying healthy is about keeping your exposure down and your defenses up.

Cold Prevention: Avoid Exposure

Colds require human contact, not cold weather. People isolated in remote arctic regions only experience colds when they receive visitors or return to civilization. Going out in cold weather with wet hair, chilling and exposure to drafts will not predispose to the common cold—contrary to what you were told as a child. Colds probably strike most commonly in the fall and winter because of the greater time spent indoors in cold weather, increasing the opportunity for viruses to spread among people. Also, the lower indoor humidity during the colder months tends to dry the lining of the nasal passages, which are the first line of defense.

The eyes and nose, highly susceptible to viral penetration, are believed to be the gateway of entry for cold viruses. And how do they get there? Most commonly they are picked up on your hands and then you transmit them when you touch your nose and eyes. Colds are primarily spread via hand-to-hand transmission of virus-contaminated nasal secretions from close, prolonged contact among individuals. The cold virus can survive for hours on your hands, and also on doorknobs, countertops and phone handles. The aerosol route of transmission via sneezing and coughing has actually received little scientific support. In fact, even kissing is unlikely to spread a cold because most viruses are shed from the nasal mucosa, not the mouth.

If you can keep your hands away from your eyes and nose you will have gone a long way towards not giving yourself a cold. But that can prove difficult for most folks—one study has found that our fingers go to our eyes or nose at least once every three hours. We can counteract the effects of this behavior by washing our hands often—at least after using the bathroom and before you eat, and more often if you are in contact with anyone suffering with a cold. Make it a habit to lather up, for a good 10 seconds with a non-bacterial soap (this will discourage drug-resistant bacteria). Although not very high tech, hand washing remains a first line of defense against infection. Along the same lines, salt water nasal rinsing on a daily basis has also been found to significantly reduce infection. A complete immersion of the face in a bowl of very warm salty water will have the same effect of rinsing away germs and irritants from their key source of entry—the eyes and nose. It's simple, cheap, and just a matter of doing it!

- Wash your hands often
- Daily saline irrigation or facial dips
- Keep your hands away from your nose and eyes
- Avoid close, prolonged exposure to people with colds (especially if you don't practice the above)

Cold Prevention: Keep your Defenses Up

Despite your best measures, cold virus can penetrate the first line of defense in your nose and eyes. In fact, every day we are bombarded with organisms, which can make us sick and every day our immune systems protect us. The stronger your immune system, the greater your resistance to infections. The foundation to an optimally functioning immune system is basic good health advice: a nutrient-dense diet, enough rest and sleep, adequate exercise, plenty of fresh air and water, and a positive outlook.

In a nutshell, a nutrient-dense diet that will support the immune system includes adequate protein (eggs, fish, meat, soy), high quality fats and oils (olive oil, nuts, seeds, organic dairy), and plenty of complex carbohydrates (garden vegetables and whole fruit). It is low in processed foods, fast foods, partially hydrogenated oils, starchy carbohydrates (bread, pasta, potatoes) and sugars.

Sugars, even natural sugar such as honey and fruit juices, depress the immune system. After a 100 gram (~4oz.) portion of sugar (fructose, glucose, honey, fruit juices) the ability of white blood cells to engulf foreign virus and bacteria is reduced by 50%, beginning less than 30 minutes after ingestion and lasting for over 5 hours.

Even if you follow an optimum diet you may choose to take nutritional supplements to insure you are getting adequate amounts of proven immune-boosting agents. These might include vitamin A, vitamin C, vitamin E, zinc, selenium, garlic, echinacea, astragalus, and/or elderberry.

Vitamin A is absolutely essential for proper immune function and has demonstrated significant anti-viral activity. For general health purposes look for doses of 5,000 i.u./day for men, 2,500 i.u. for women. During an acute viral infection a single dose of 50,000 i.u. for 1-2 days is safe in all except pregnant women.

Vitamin C is well known for its use with colds. It has many different immune-enhancing effects, and has been shown to be anti-viral and antibacterial. Numerous clinical studies support its role in the prevention and treatment of the common cold. There is debate over the optimum dose, but on a daily basis 500 mg. to 2,000 mg. a day is popular and safe. During times of illness you might want to increase the dose in 1,000 mg. increments every hour or two until "bowel tolerance", i.e., stomach rumbling and loose stool. Simple ascorbic acid is the best form for most people.

Vitamin E 's principal supplemental use is as an antioxidant, but it also has significant immune enhancing properties, particularly with the elderly. A recent study reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) showed a very significant increase in immune function (depending on doses, up to 65% increase) in seniors using vitamin E for 4 months. For general purposes, doses are 400-800 i.u. per day. Look for natural ("d-") rather than synthetic ("dl-") vitamin E containing "mixed tocopherols".

Zinc is a mineral essential to many aspects of immunity. Zinc, like vitamin C, has direct anti-viral activity including inhibiting the growth of the common cold virus. Zinc-containing lozenges have been found to significantly cut the duration of a cold by an average of three days. The lozenges need to be taken at the first sign of a cold, sucked on until they dissolve, every 2 to 3 hours. Don't exceed 125 mg. a day for more than a week—too much zinc can also depress the immune system. Zinc gluconate at 15-25 mg. per lozenge is the most studied form.

Although not as well known as zinc, selenium is another mineral vital to many aspects of immune functioning. In one study, supplementation with selenium at 200 mcg per day resulted in an 118% increase in the ability of white blood cells to kill tumor cells, and an 82% increase in the activity of "natural killer" cells.

From the herbal medicine chest there are quite a few plants particularly good at boosting your immune system's cold-fighting power. Garlic may be the best known but echinacea, astragalus, and elderberry are fast becoming known for their own contributions toward staying off viral infections.

Garlic, one of the most aromatic and studied herbs, exerts a broad spectrum of antimicrobial activity against bacteria, fungi, worms, and virus. Fresh garlic extract has been proven to kill flu and common cold viruses. If you have the taste for it, one clove of fresh garlic a day should keep a cold away—it may also keep your companions at bay. If you opt for a deodorized commercial garlic supplement look for allicin (garlic's active ingredient) at a dose of 4,000 mcg. or at least 10 mg. of alliin.

Echinacea, also known as purple coneflower, is becoming as well known as garlic in the cold fighting arena. And research backs its ability to strengthen the immune system against cold virus and flu. Studies have shown echinacea's use in both preventing colds and shortening their duration. The key is to take it at the first sign of viral infection: a dropperful of tincture in a little warm water four times a day. The tingling, numbing sensation on the tongue means it's potent.

If you are coming down with more than your share of colds this year you may want to consider taking astragalus, an immune-boosting herb from China. The Chinese use this herb as a tonic for increasing resistance to disease and infection, to restore depressed immunity, and as a general health promoter. Their studies have shown it can reduce the incidence and shorten the course of a cold. Part of its action is by increasing levels of interferon, the body's own antiviral agent. Start taking it at the beginning of cold and flu season. Follow the dosage recommendations on the product label.

Another herb with an age-old reputation for fighting various strains of virus is elderberry. The Israeli studied the effectiveness of this herb against a flu outbreak. Subjects in the early stages of flu were treated with either a placebo or elderberry extract. In the first 24 hours of illness 20% of flu sufferers showed significant relief, 73% felt better after the second day, and in 3 days 90% were reported cured. The placebo group took 6 days to feel as well. It is patented as Sambucol and has recently become available in the U.S. in this form.

Well-versed herbalists know that there are many other herbs that can strengthen your immune system and help you fend off a cold. The herbs listed above, as well as the vitamins and minerals, should give you a good foundation to work with. But don't forget your other foundations to good health. Equally, if not more important than supplement are a good diet with plenty of clean water and fresh air, time for relaxing, time for playing and exercising, and simply enjoying yourself, your friends, and your family.