

Getting A Cold? You Can Avoid The Next One

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Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

Since there is, as yet, no known cure for the all too common cold, your only option in staying well is to avoid getting a cold in the first place. And, the more people you come into contact with at work or school, the better the chance that you're going to be in the company of someone who has a cold. Since most of us have neither the inclination nor the luxury of becoming hermits, defense is key.

Kathy Shortelle, B.S., R.N., clinical supervisor at Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association, says—and it can't be repeated too often—that frequent hand washing is the quickest, easiest and most effective means of avoiding a cold. And that doesn't mean rinse, rinse dab, dab. It means lots of soapy scrubbing of every part of the hands, especially around and under the fingernails. And, if you're in a public restroom, use the paper towel you've dried your hands with both to turn off the faucet and open the door. You don't even want to think about what germs might be lurking on that doorknob.

“Research has shown that public rest rooms are some of the dirtiest areas,” said SVNA's new Executive Director Patricia Tremblay, R.N., M.S. “Touching countertops, sinks and faucets can actually result in contamination worse than not washing your hands at all. If a personal hand sanitizer is available that may be the best action.”

Along the same lines, don't cover coughs or sneezes with your bare hands. If you have time—and how often does that happen?—grab a tissue and then dispose of it right away. If you don't have time to get hold of a tissue experts recommend coughing or sneezing into your upper sleeve, which not many of us would think to do, but it does keep you from contaminating your hands and everything you touch. This is actually taught in schools as the “superman sneeze,” Tremblay said. “Think of holding his cape up.”

Tip #3 is to keep your hands away from your face. Germs can enter the system through the mouth, nose and even the eyes. Face touching, Shortelle said, is one of the most common ways that children catch colds—and pass them along to their parents.

If you have access to a sauna, take advantage of it. Researchers in Germany some years ago found that those who took a sauna twice a week got half as many colds as those who didn't. While they can't say definitively why this is, the theory is that inhaling air hotter than 80 degrees kills germs and viruses.

Drink lots and lots of liquids, which flush out all the things that should be gotten rid of and keep you well hydrated. Eight 8-ounce glasses a day is still recommended for adults. Indelicate as it may seem to mention, the color of your urine is a good gauge of whether you're getting enough fluids. If it's nearly clear, you're doing fine. If it's yellow, you're not.

Get outside and get some fresh air, especially in cold weather when central heating dries you out and makes you more vulnerable to colds. Regular aerobic exercise makes your heart pump more blood, makes you breathe faster to transfer more oxygen from your lungs to your blood, and makes you sweat, all of which help increase the body's natural ability to fight off germs and viruses.

Winter is the time to pay special attention to a good balanced diet, particularly dark green, red, and yellow vegetables and fruits. Probiotics, such as low-fat yogurt and kefir, have been shown help ward off colds, too.

If one of your New Year's resolutions was to stop smoking, good for you. Among all the havoc smoking wreaks on your body is increased susceptibility to more frequent and more severe colds. While you're at it, go easy on the alcohol. Heavy use of alcohol suppresses the immune system. And because alcohol actually dehydrates the body, drinking it removes more fluids from your system than it takes in. Obviously, a cocktail does not count toward those daily 64 ounces of liquids you should be drinking.

Finally, with the holidays just a memory and many more weeks of winter still ahead, take time to relax and activate the immune system at the same time. Earth is at rest. You should be, too.