

How to Stay Healthy in Cold and Flu Season

By

Beth Howard

Oct. 12, 2014 5:05 p.m. ET

If you want to ward off colds—and worse—this fall and winter, new research offers some help.

Colds are bad enough. But about 5% of them morph into something more serious—sinus infections, bronchitis or pneumonia—and people 65 and older are particularly susceptible to that threat, says William Schaffner, an infectious-disease specialist at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville, Tenn. Flu, meanwhile, puts thousands of people in the hospital each year.

Your best defense starts with diligent hand-washing and a flu shot. But studies suggest that there are additional steps you can take to stay free of respiratory illnesses, or at least make a speedier recovery. Here are some of those steps.

Strike a Pose

Practicing so-called mindfulness meditation—a combination of gentle yoga and meditation—for eight weeks reduced the incidence, intensity and duration of cold and flu symptoms by 40% to 50% among a group of people over age 50, compared with people in a control group who didn't meditate, researchers at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health in Madison, Wis., found.

A group of older adults who engaged in moderate exercise over the study period reduced symptoms by 30% to 40%, compared with the control group.

A recent study at Tufts University in Medford, Mass., also found immune benefits for mind-body therapies, especially tai chi and qi gong, two centuries-old practices merging movement and meditation.

Exercise...Your Vocal Cords

Japanese researchers recently tested this strategy by taking blood and saliva samples from a group of people over age 60 before and after a singing exercise.

Levels of stress-related hormones like cortisol dropped after study participants belted out a song, while levels of immunoglobulin A, a substance that deflects viruses and bacteria, rose—both evidence of a stronger immune system. Consider joining a choir or choral group to keep microbial invaders at bay.

Pop a Probiotic

In a study from the Rutgers School of Health Related Professions in New Jersey, people who took certain probiotics—microorganisms believed to have disease-fighting properties—caught colds at the same rate as those who got a placebo. But the symptoms of those treated with the probiotics ended two days sooner and were less severe.

The probiotics appear to reduce cold symptoms by muting the body's inflammatory response to cold viruses, says the lead author of the Rutgers study, Tracey J. Smith, a registered dietitian and an adjunct assistant professor at the school.

There are many choices among probiotics, which are available in capsules, powders and liquids and in some yogurts and other foods. Ms. Smith recommends looking for products with the strains used in the study, *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* and *Bifidobacterium animalis lactis*. She adds that people who have a serious chronic disease should check with a doctor before using probiotics.

Stay Rested

People who sleep less than seven hours a night are three times as likely to catch a bug as those who put in eight-plus hours of shut-eye, Carnegie Mellon University researchers showed.

In a recent Finnish study, people who had received a flu shot and were then awakened after just a few hours of sleep produced fewer protective antibodies than those who slept

normally after vaccination.

Pick the Right Supplement

Although supplements won't stop a cold in its tracks, they may reduce your misery. Vitamin C (one to two grams a day) shortens colds slightly and, if you take it every day, may lessen symptoms when respiratory infections strike, according to the latest review of studies from the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, a nonprofit health-care resource.

Another recent Cochrane review showed that zinc lozenges (75 milligrams a day) may cut a day or two off a cold if taken within 24 hours of the first cough or snuffle. (Note: Some users experience a bad taste or nausea.)

Get a (Social) Life

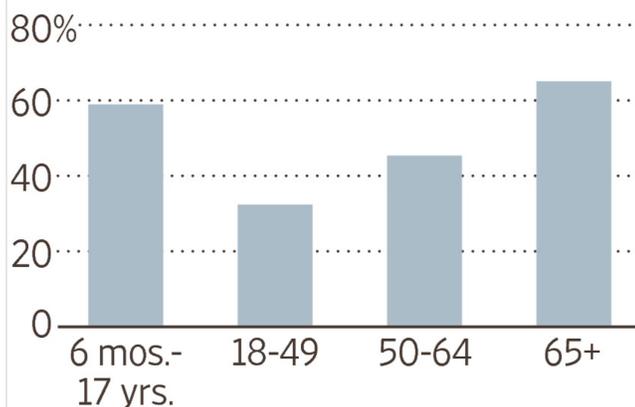
Interacting with lots of people would seem to multiply your chances for catching a bug. But a Carnegie Mellon study suggests a dynamic social life offers a hedge against respiratory illnesses.

Researchers exposed a group of people to a cold virus, then waited to see who came down with the sniffles. Those with the most social networks—such as club memberships, work friendships or participation in a faith community—were least likely to get sick. Relative loners were more susceptible.

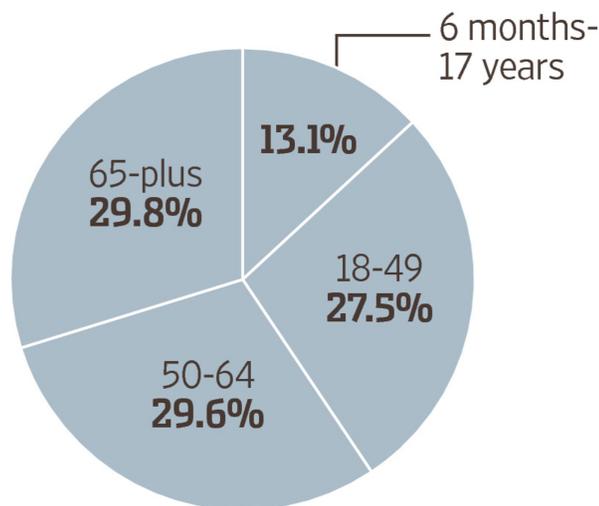
Communion with others may help by alleviating stress, though the study didn't address

Flu Fighters

A look at the percentage of people, by age, who got a flu shot last season shows adults 65 and older were most likely to get vaccinated...



But they still accounted for almost three of every 10 reported flu-related hospitalizations.



Sources: FluSurv-NET via Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The Wall Street Journal

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Ms. Howard is a writer in North Carolina. She can be reached at encore@wsj.com.