

How to Fight Off the Flu—Simple Preventive Steps

It's flu season once again and most of us are familiar with the most common advice for beating the bug (and stopping the spread of germs): get a flu shot, cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze, wash your hands frequently and try to avoid close contact with sick people.

But did you know that exercise, diet—even sunshine—can affect your immune system?

According to Katie Vigano, a physician assistant at Washington Township Medical Foundation's Newark Clinic, eating a healthy diet can help you fight off infection. "A good foundation for fortifying your immune system is eating two servings of fruits and at least three to four cups of veggies per day; I tell my patients to eat the rainbow. It's vital to keep the foods we eat diverse in color to ensure we are getting the right amount of vitamins and others nutrients."

With the holidays upon us—starting with Halloween and all the sugar-laden candy—there will be a plethora of temptations to indulge in sugary goods. "Sugar can suppress the immune system, so remember to avoid overindulging," Vigano advises. "There are some really great



Physician Assistant, Katie Vigano offers simple suggestions to make a big difference in fighting the flu.

foods with antimicrobial properties such as ginger, garlic, turmeric, onions, oregano and some mushrooms varieties, that can help ward off the flu and other viruses, so you might consider cooking with those when possible," she adds.

Vitamin D is another immune supporter, yet many of us are unknowingly deficient. In fact, notes Vigano, 70 percent of our population is severely lacking in this crucial vitamin, which is why people often catch colds and flu this time of year so easily. "Consider getting a blood panel to find out if you have enough vitamin D in your system. An

optimal level is 45 nanograms per milliliter or higher. This level has been shown to lower your risk of contracting influenza by 75 percent."

Supplementing with vitamin D3 is the most efficient way to improve your vitamin D levels, Vigano notes. "There are over-the-counter drops for infants, gummies for children and gel caps that adults can take. It is safe to consider taking this supplement at least a few days every week to keep levels high enough for protection through flu season, which extends through around March or April every year."

However, Vigano adds, those who are confirmed to be deficient need to take either a megadose once weekly or a lower dose every day until their results reflect optimal levels. Exclusively breast-fed babies often require vitamin D supplementation. A sufficient vitamin D level in conjunction with your flu shot significantly limits your chances of catching the flu this and every flu season. Food sources for vitamin D include several types of fatty fish (or cod liver oil) and vitamin D-fortified foods.

Of course, one of the best ways to get a beneficial amount of vitamin D is to expose as much skin as possible to sunlight for 15-20 minutes per

day. Many studies show that the body is most efficient at making vitamin D at midday.

Getting the proper amount of sleep and exercise is another excellent way to boost your immune system. “Aim for seven to eight hours of sleep per night and 30 minutes of exercise per day,” Vigano counsels, adding that exercise helps improve your sleep quality.

The body isn't the only thing that needs rest; even your mind needs a certain amount of it per day. “I encourage my patients to meditate, even 10 minutes a day can help reduce stress, which adversely affects the immune system,” says Vigano. Think you can't sit still for that long? There are several guided meditation apps for smart phones; some of these can even be integrated with a health app for an all-around healthy combination.

Also, be certain to talk to your doctor about getting a flu shot. Early fall is the best time to get vaccinated, and the earlier the better, as it takes two weeks after vaccination for the antibodies that protect against the flu to develop in the body.

You can find more information about this year's flu season and the benefits of vaccinations at <https://www.cdc.gov/flu>.

Following these simple guidelines could help you fight off the flu and enhance your overall well-being throughout the year. Here's to your good health!