

REDBOOK

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Cold and Flu? Not You!

Five proven ways to stay well this winter.



Go ahead — wash your hands 20 times a day and avoid anyone with the sniffles like the plague. You'll lower your odds of getting sick, but germs are *everywhere*, and you can't dodge them forever. The key to staying healthy: strengthening your immune system to fight against the winter bugs you do come in contact with. Here are five easy methods to boost your body's defenses during cold-and-flu season.

Get a massage.

Massage lowers levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which destroys immune cells, according to a study by the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami Medical School. "Massage also ups your stores of natural killer cells — the immune system's front line of defense," says Tiffany Field, Ph.D., director of the Institute. It only takes a 20-minute weekly rubdown to reap the benefits, so solicit a backrub from your guy, buy a vibrating massager, like the Buzz Mini Massager (\$20, brookstone.com), or book a professional massage (massage-therapy schools may offer discounted prices; find one at naturalhealers.com).

Take vitamins C and E.

You've probably heard that vitamin C helps you get over a cold faster, but it's even more effective if you also get enough vitamin E, says Brian Levine, M.D., medical director of The Cough Center in Laguna Hills, CA. "Vitamin E makes white blood cells more efficient at fighting off infection," explains Levine. You need 65 to 75 mg of vitamin C daily, but if you feel a cold coming on, get up to 1,000 mg by taking a supplement or noshing on natural sources like berries, peppers, and citrus fruits. Vitamin E can be toxic if taken in large doses, so don't take a high-dose supplement — you'll get the 100 to 200 mg you need for immune support from your multi and by eating almonds, peanut butter, and sunflower seeds, all good sources of E.

Have a good laugh.

Women who laughed aloud while watching funny videos had higher levels of germ-fighting killer-cell activity than those who watched unfunny videos, according to an Indiana State University study. Laughter may lower cortisol levels and release endorphins, feel-good chemicals that trigger immune cells. To tickle your funny bone, spend time with a friend who shares your sense of humor, watch a funny YouTube clip, or follow your child's lead: Kindergartners find something to laugh about 300 times a day, while adults laugh only 17 times.

Go dancing.

In moderation, most forms of exercise enhance immune system activity. But doing a mind-body workout such as dancing also reduces stress levels and raises endorphins. And if you boogie to the Billboard Top 10 Countdown, you'll get another bonus: Those who listened to popular music experienced a 28 percent rise in levels of the antibody immunoglobulin A (IgA), according to a study from Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre, PA. "IgA is found in blood, saliva, and other bodily fluids and helps destroy viruses that enter the body," says lead researcher Carl Charnetski, Ph.D.

Make whoopee. People who had sex once or twice a week had 30 percent higher levels of IgA than those who had sex less often, according to one study. Sex also releases mood-boosting chemicals called opioid peptides, which rouse the immune system. But don't fret if you're not in the mood: Just a snuggle can also have flu-fighting benefits.

Here, germ-fighting food suggestions from M. Eric Gershwin, M.D., editor of [*Handbook of Nutrition and Immunity*](#).

Green tea: Its antioxidants help heal infections.

Dark chocolate: The antioxidants in cocoa keep immune cells working.

Shiitake mushrooms: Lentinan, a carbohydrate found in these tasty shrooms, may boost cells' response to infection.

Greens: They're loaded with zinc, which helps white blood cells function.

Garlic: Using garlic regularly can prevent or reduce the severity of common infections.

Apples: Their antioxidants help prevent colds.