

14 Ways to Stay Healthy This Winter

These secret weapons will help you and the family stay well during the cold, dark months of winter.

Dorothy Foltz-Gray

In winter, viruses and bacteria abound like snowflakes. Work and school environments test our immune systems. And exercise likely takes a backseat when icicles are in view. But don't despair. You and your family can hang onto good health in spite of the challenges. Here's how.



1. Wash Up

Preempt viruses and bacteria by frequently washing your hands—and teach your kids to do the same, says Maritza Baez, M.D., a family physician in Buffalo, New York. Nothing fancy is required. Simply do this: "Work up a lather and wash for at least 30 seconds before eating and after you go to the bathroom," he says. Wash under your fingernails too. That's where germs lurk.

2. Change Your Toothbrush

"Use a new toothbrush after you've had a cold, the flu, a mouth infection, or sore throat," says dentist Jeff Golub-Evans, D.D.S., director of the New York Center for Cosmetic Dentistry in New York City. "Germs can hide in the toothbrush and lead to reinfection." The smartest Motherboard Moms we know stock up on toothbrushes so there's always a spare handy.

3. Don't Forget Your Feet

Winter's heavy shoes, boots, and socks can take their toll on tootsies, large and small. The best defense: Moisturize your feet daily to keep fungi from entering cracked winter skin, says Robert Klein, M.D., a podiatric physician and foot surgeon in Texarkana, Texas: "And wear socks with synthetic fibers to wick away moisture faster."

4. Go Toward the Light

Six out of every 100 Americans may suffer from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a malady of mood swings that occurs when light diminishes in winter, according to the Academy of Family Physicians. To counter SAD, Jeffrey Sumber, M.A., CPC, a psychotherapist practicing in Chicago, recommends vitamin D, exercise, and light therapy. Some lamps and box lights are designed to treat the disorder. Ask your doctor to recommend one if she thinks you have SAD. To keep your kids upbeat, help them get off the couch and outside whenever there is a sunny day. About 10 to 15 minutes of play in the sun is a good mood-lifter (and source of D).

5. Wet Your Whistle

You may not feel as thirsty in cold weather, according to a University of New Hampshire study. But that can up your risk for dehydration. "Allowing your body to become dehydrated can leave you more vulnerable to getting sick," says Wendy Wells, N.M.D., a naturopathic physician in Scottsdale, Arizona. Water helps the body carry nutrients to cells and get rid of toxins. Without enough water, you start dragging. Dr. Wells recommends drinking half your weight in ounces every day. (So if you weigh 120 pounds, drink 60 ounces.)

6. Pamper Your Skin

Skin takes a beating in winter. To keep it healthy, dermatologist Brooke Jackson, M.D., founder of Skin Wellness Center of Chicago, and mother of three young children, suggests increasing the humidity in your home by adjusting the gauge on your furnace or placing a humidifier in each bedroom. Aim for a humidity level between 40 and 50 percent.

Lavishly moisturize after a brief shower (long ones dry you out more) using jarred, not pump, moisturizers. (Pump lotions contain more water.) And don't skip the sunscreen—winter sun can glare, especially off snow.

7. Get Your Flu Shots

It's smart for families to get annual flu shots, but they are especially important for expectant mothers and new moms, says Amy Herold, M.D., an ob/gyn and medical director of HealthTap, a healthcare community in Palo Alto, California. "They protect mom from getting the flu, and they pass [protective] antibodies to the baby. Antibodies are also passed through breast milk." Dr. Herold also recommends that moms and family get vaccinated for whooping cough.

8. Fill Up on Fiber

A 2010 study at the University of Illinois found that the fiber in foods like oats, apples, and nuts helps reduce inflammation and strengthens the immune system by increasing anti-inflammatory proteins. The suggested daily fiber intake for an adult woman and children ages 4 to 8 is 25 grams a day. An apple has 3.5 grams of fiber.

9. Slip Zinc into Your Yogurt

That's what Shantel Maratea, CHHC, a nutritional counselor in Valley Stream, New York, says she does to keep her 12-year-old cold-prone daughter healthy in winter: "Starting each November, I give her two daily servings of yogurt with probiotics—live healthy bacteria that help replenish good bacteria in the gut—with zinc added. She hasn't had a cold for three years." According to pediatrician Williams Sears, associate clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of California-Irvine, the safest way to get zinc is through foods like oysters, zinc-fortified cereals (best for kids), crab, beef, turkey, and beans.

10. Consider Echinacea

Whether or not you think echinacea helps fight or reduce colds depends upon whom you believe. Some experts who tout its effects point to a 2007 review of 14 studies at the University of Connecticut that found that the herbal supplement echinacea reduces the risk of a cold by 58 percent and cuts 1.4 days off its duration. Other studies have reported it has minimal effects. If you're into alternative medicine and want to give it a try, follow the dosage recommendations on the bottle. And talk to your pediatrician before giving the herb to your children or taking it if you are pregnant.

11. Eat More Mushrooms

"Include lots of mushrooms, especially shiitakes, in your cooking," says dietitian Jill Nussinow, M.S., R.D., author of *The Veggie Queen*. A 2009 study at Tufts University found that after a 10-week diet of powdered white button mushrooms—the most common kind—certain immune cells in mice became more active, boosting protection against colds and viruses.

12. Chill

"Stress can cause illness for two main reasons," says Elizabeth R. Lombardo, Ph.D., M.S., P.T., author of *A Happy You* and mother of two: "Our immune system does not function well when we are stressed. And we are more likely to engage in unhealthy habits such as 'Ben and Jerry's' therapy." Chill out by heading to the movies, building a snowman, or just breathing deeply for a few minutes.

13. Rinse Your Nose

Although nasal irrigation sounds gross, studies have shown that those who rinsed their nasal passages every day for six months had fewer symptoms from allergies and sinus infections—and cut back on antibiotics and nasal sprays. Try rinsing with a Neti pot or a nose dropper, using a saline solution of 1 cup water, 1/4 teaspoon salt, and 1/4 teaspoon soda. Pour or squirt some of the mixture in one nostril, while holding the other nostril shut. Repeat on the other side and blow your now healthier nose. Older children can be taught to use a Neti pot, too, but ask your pediatrician before starting the therapy.

14. Keep Moving

Got cabin fever? Get your workout by shoveling snow, suggests wellness expert Dasha Libin, M.S., creator of Draco Fitness, a health, sports, and wellness program in New York City: "It burns calories and activates your lower- and upper-body muscles." An hour of shoveling burns a whopping 400 calories. Or, with the kids, give FitDeck exercise playing cards a try. Warm up, draw a card, do the exercise the card describes for one minute, and move on to the next card. You—and your kids—won't be bored, Libin says.