

the Cold War



Your gym is a battlefield littered with germs that could wreak havoc on your New Year's training goals. Learn how to steer clear of sickness all season with our immunity-boosting tricks.
BY BETH HOWARD ■ ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARCOS CHIN

Hey, you in the running shoes! You can thank those sneaks for keeping you snuffle-free while your less sporty friends are sneezing themselves silly. According to a study from the University of South Carolina in Columbia, people who routinely worked up a sweat had a 23 percent lower risk of catching a cold than those who didn't. Why? Regular exercise bolsters the immune system. But even though you're a lean, mean cardio machine, viruses and bacteria lurking on treadmills, locker-room benches and who knows where else can still sideline you. Here's how to dodge the season's germiest situations—and bounce back fast if you do get sick.

“The guy on the treadmill next to me is doing more sneezing than sweating.”

WAGE GERM WARFARE All those get-in-shape New Year's resolutions mean your gym is packed with

people—and their germs. To better your chances of staying cold-free, stick 10 percent bleach wipes in your bag to swipe machines with before working out, says Philip M. Tierno Jr., Ph.D., director of clinical microbiology and immunology at New York University Langone Medical Center. Beware the disinfectant spray that your gym supplies: The mystery solution may not be strong enough to kill germs, and, even worse, the bottle's exterior could be crawling with them. As for the sneezing jogger, consider offering him a tissue or a concerned “Are you okay?” Then cross your fingers that he takes your hint and cuts his workout short.

“I can't hear the in-flight movie over the sniffing and hacking of the woman across the aisle.”

WAGE GERM WARFARE Yuck! Next time you're stuck in the snuffle zone on a flight, position your air

vent strategically, suggests Martin B. Hocking, Ph.D., professor emeritus in the department of chemistry at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, who has researched viruses on planes. “If I notice that people around me are coughing or sneezing, I adjust the air vent so it is directed in front of my face to blow away any droplets that could hold a virus,” he says.

Pack a saline nasal mist in your carry-on bag and take several deep sniffs every half hour to keep your nasal passages moist. Low humidity makes you up to 20 percent more likely to catch a cold on a plane than during your travels by car, train or bus, according to Hocking's studies. The reason: Think of your body as an exclusive club. The bouncers at the door are cilia, tiny hairlike structures on the surface of cells that stop nasty germs from entering your nose but that don't work if the surrounding air is dry.

“I love using the sauna at the gym, but my friends say that I could catch something. Are they right?”

WAGE GERM WARFARE Not likely. In fact, getting your sweat on could actually protect you: A study in Germany found that using a sauna twice a week reduced the frequency of colds by about half. The researchers aren't sure why, but

they suspect that the exposure to alternating heat and cold boosts the immune system. Of course, you still need to be wary of things people touch in the sauna and locker room (think handles, switches and hair dryers), where cold and

Test Your Flu IQ

Learn the truth behind three common myths.

HOT AIR If a cold lasts more than a week, it must be a bacterial infection, requiring antibiotics.

COLD TRUTH The symptoms of a cold can last three weeks, and antibiotics have no effect on the 200-plus viruses that cause them, says Ralph Gonzalez, M.D., professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco.

HOT AIR When it comes to colds, C is the supervitamin.

COLD TRUTH Research on C is not convincing; it's D that keeps the bugs at bay. University of Colorado scientists found that people with the highest levels of D had fewer colds, possibly because the vitamin stimulates the production of infection-fighting chemicals.

HOT AIR There's nothing you can do once the flu strikes.

COLD TRUTH If you've been sick less than 48 hours, ask your doc for an antiviral drug like Tamiflu or Relenza. It can shorten your misery by a few days, says William Schaffner, M.D., vice president of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases in Bethesda, Maryland.

flu germs can live for 24 to 48 hours, explains Elizabeth Scott, Ph.D., codirector of the Simmons College Center for Hygiene & Health in Home & Community in Boston. Wash your hands with soap and hot water for 15 to 20 seconds or use a hand sanitizer after touching common surfaces and before touching your nose, eyes or mouth. Those are the gateways that allow infectious microbes to get a foothold in your system in the first place, Scott says.

“The cashier at the supermarket sneezes on my change, then hands it to me.”

WAGE GERM WARFARE First thought: *Ewww!* Second thought: Please pass the soap, stat. When researchers at

Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, collected dollar bills from around their community, they found that a whopping 94 percent were contaminated with potentially harmful microbes. Whenever you handle paper money, wash your hands or use a sanitizer containing at least 62 percent alcohol immediately afterward, Tierno advises. Coins are less risky because the metals they contain inhibit the growth of viruses and bacteria. If it's winter, slip your gloves on before taking your change; you're headed outside anyway. Paying with a credit card? Don't pick up that communal pen. It is covered not only with the cashier's germs but also with those of every customer who has used it before you. “I carry my own pen with me at all times,” Tierno says.

What's Up, Docs?

Try these tricks experts use to steer clear of vexing viruses.

“Instead of shaking hands as a greeting, I pat people's shoulder or clasp their upper arm to keep them at a healthy distance.”

—Donnica L. Moore, M.D., founder of women's health website drdonnica.com

“I wear a long-sleeve cotton shirt under my scrubs. If I have to scratch my nose, I cover my hand with the shirt.”

—Ross Cohen, D.P.M., podiatrist, Baltimore Washington Medical Center, Glen Burnie, Maryland

“I use my knuckles to press elevator buttons, to touch screens and even to push open

doors. That way, if I rub my eye or nose, I'm less likely to introduce a virus into my system.”

—Parminder Bolina, M.D., internist, Baptist Hospital, Nashville

“I hold my breath when someone coughs or sneezes near me.”

—Len Horovitz, M.D., pulmonary expert, Lenox Hill Hospital, New York City

“Handbags pick up all kinds of viruses and bacteria. When guests come over, I ask that they leave them on a shelf in the hall.”

—Sue G. DeCotiis, M.D., internist, Beth Israel Medical Center, New York City

Drugstore Cheat Sheet

Symptom		OTC Options
	NASAL CONGESTION	<p>DAYTIME Nondrowsy pseudoephedrine (Sudafed) or phenylephrine (Sudafed PE) shrinks blood vessels in your nose.</p> <p>NIGHTTIME Take sedating antihistamine diphenhydramine (Benadryl) alone to block the inflammatory effects of histamine, or add congestion-clearing nasal spray oxymetazoline (Afrin).</p>
	SNEEZING	<p>DAYTIME Antihistamine loratadine (Alavert, Claritin, Claritin RediTabs) blocks histamine but keeps you alert.</p> <p>NIGHTTIME Antihistamine diphenhydramine (Benadryl) will help you nod off.</p>
	SORE THROAT	LOZENGES with benzocaine (Cepacol), hexylresorcinol (Sucrets) or hexylresorcinol and benzalkonium chloride (Beechams Max Strength) contain numbing medication to reduce pain.
	COUGH	<p>LOOSE COUGH Guaifenesin (Robitussin Cough & Cold CF) is an expectorant that brings up phlegm to clear airways.</p> <p>DRY COUGH Suppressant dextromethorphan (Robitussin Cough & Chest Congestion DM) weakens the cough reflex.</p>
FEVER/ HEADACHE	<p>IBUPROFEN (Advil, Motrin) blocks prostaglandins, substances that promote pain, fever and inflammation.</p> <p>ACETAMINOPHEN (Tylenol) elevates your pain threshold.</p>	

Source: Keith T. Veltri, Pharm.D., assistant professor at Touro College of Pharmacy in New York City

“I’m leaving for a ski vacation in a week and feel a cold coming on.”

WAGE GERM WARFARE Head into hibernation with several bottles of water, but first stop at the supermarket to stock up on supplements. The herb echinacea can shorten a cold by about a day and a half, according to a review from the University of Connecticut School of Pharmacy in Storrs. “Research indicates that taking 900 micrograms daily does the trick,” says study author C. Michael White, Pharm.D. Lozenges are another good bet: Researchers at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation reported that people who took one zinc gluconate

lozenge containing 13.3 milligrams of zinc every two hours for as long as they had symptoms recovered from their colds at least three days faster than those who didn’t. Just avoid Zicam Cold Remedy Nasal Gel or Swabs. The FDA recently issued a warning against these products after some consumers reported losing their sense of smell.

Bottom line? No matter how careful you are, sometimes there is no escaping a bug. The good news is that all the jogs, Pilates classes and crunches you do keep your immune system as fit as your body, so you’ll feel better in a flash. And in the meantime, there’s always chicken soup. ■