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Can you really avoid catching the latest bug that's going around? Yes, you can! Start by testing your cold and flu smarts, then read on for expert tips and secrets from women who hardly ever get sick.

BY BARBARA BRODY

What's your cold and flu IQ? True or false:

➤ **You're more likely to catch a cold or the flu from someone coughing or sneezing on you than from touching a germier doorknob.** *True.* Though germs can live on hard surfaces for up to 48 hours, you're much more likely to get sick when they're spread through the air via a cough or sneeze. That's because the virus starts to weaken as soon as it leaves your body, says Jon Abramson, MD, a pediatrician and medical advisor for the nonprofit Families Fighting Flu. So a direct hit from a cough or sneeze is usually much more potent than droplets that have been sitting around for even a few minutes.

➤ **The flu vaccine can give you the flu.** *False.* "The shot contains a dead virus, so it's impossible to get the flu from it," says Dr. Abramson, though some people do develop swelling at the injection site or a low-grade fever because the body recognizes the vaccine as something foreign that it should fight off. Even if you get the nasal mist vaccine—which is a live but weakened form of the virus—you still won't get the flu. "The nasal mist version is designed so that it can't spread to your lungs or anywhere else in your body," he explains.

➤ **You get instant protection from the flu shot.** *False.* It can actually take up to two weeks from when you get the vaccine until your body develops antibodies to the virus. That's why the earlier you get the vaccine each year, the better. Flu season officially starts in October and goes through March. (The vaccine is now recommended for *everyone* over 6 months old.) Also know that the vaccine doesn't give you 100% protection, but it does reduce your chances of getting sick by 50% to 90%. And if you do happen to catch the flu after you've been vaccinated, it will most likely not be as bad, says Dr. Abramson.

➤ **If you feel like you have the worst cold ever and you have a fever, it's probably the flu.** *True,* for adults. There are many conditions that can cause fevers in young children, but if an adult has severe cold-like symptoms plus a fever of 101°F or higher, it's most likely the flu, says Dr. Abramson. Other telltale signs include body aches, chills and feeling so tired that you can barely drag yourself out of bed. If you think you have the flu, call your doctor right away. He may suggest antiviral medications like Relenza and Tamiflu that can cut the amount of time you're sick in half.

PLEASE TURN TO 110



our stay-well solutions

Readers who have some of the germiest jobs around share their best cold- and flu-fighting tips.

"I drink at least one glass of OJ a day, and take zinc and vitamin C supplements when I feel a cold coming on."

—Heather Poole, 40, flight attendant based in Los Angeles and author of *Cruising Attitude: Tales of Crashpads, Crew Drama, and Crazy Passengers at 35,000 Feet*

WHY IT WORKS Zinc may help stop the cold virus from reproducing and it gives your immune cells a boost, says Stacey Rizza, MD, an infectious disease specialist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Some studies show that zinc may help prevent colds as well as shorten their duration. To help lower your odds of getting sick, consider taking one lozenge every day during cold season (check in with your doc first) or as soon as you notice other people around you sneezing. Already sniffing? Start sucking on zinc (one lozenge a day) ASAP and you might shave a few days off your suffering.

The research on vitamin C is mixed (some studies show it helps and others say it doesn't), but it can't hurt to try. "I take vitamin C when I feel cold symptoms coming on," says Susan Gordon, pharmacy supervisor for CVS in Tampa, Florida.



"I try to get 8 hours of sleep a night."

—Cheryl Cairns, 48, pediatric nurse practitioner at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio

WHY IT WORKS Getting enough sleep may strengthen your immune system by making it more active and putting it in "ready to fight" mode, explains Dr. Rizza. People who regularly get less than 7 hours of shut-eye nightly are nearly three times more likely to catch a cold compared with those who get 8 or more hours a night, according to research from Carnegie Mellon University. Having trouble getting good rest? See "Sleep Better Tonight" (page 89) for help.

"I exercise almost every day—I'm training to be a Zumba instructor—and I rarely get sick."

—Rhonda Traylor, 46, part-time Sittercity.com nanny from Charlotte, North Carolina

WHY IT WORKS Exercise, much like sleep, seems to bolster immunity. It also keeps stress in check, which helps lower levels of the hormone cortisol (high levels of it can take a toll on your immune system). Get moving regularly and you could get nearly 50% fewer colds, according to research in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. Aim for moderate to intense exercise (at least a brisk walk) for 30 minutes daily, says Dr. Rizza. ❁



Kleenex Cool Touch Tissue: soft, not greasy.

COLD COMFORTS

Kleenex Cool Touch Facial Tissue (\$2.19; at drugstores and grocery stores). Made with a special ingredient that gives a cooling sensation when it comes into contact with your skin, this tissue will prevent that Rudolph-like nose. Bonus: It doesn't have the greasy texture of lotion-infused tissue.

C.O. Bigelow Cold and Flu Soak Herbal Formula No.122 (\$18; bigelowchemlsts.com). Add four to six capfuls to a steamy bath when your nose is so stuffed that it feels bigger than your head. The eucalyptus and peppermint help decongest you by opening up your nasal passages, and the herbs also help relieve muscle aches.

Halls Naturals Mountain Berry (or Harvest Peach) with a Soothing Honey Center (\$1.99; at drugstores). These lozenges soothe your throat with honey, while the menthol helps relieve coughs and coats nasal passages.

GERMS BE GONE!

After you scrub with soap and water, reach for a paper towel if you're in a public restroom. It removes more germs from your hands than a hand dryer, finds a study published in the *Journal of Applied Microbiology*.