

PSA IN GOOD HEALTH: EIGHT WAYS TO STAY HEALTHY THIS WINTER

Now that we're in the season when colds, flu, stomach bugs, and other infections run rampant, it's an ideal time to review strategies that can help us stay healthy this winter. Picking up the germs that cause these infections is as easy as touching an infected person or surface and then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. That's something we do an average of 15.7 times an hour, according to a study at University of California, Berkeley. Frequent hand washing is the leading recommended infection-prevention strategy, but a few additional steps can also help you stay healthy this winter. Here are eight strategies to protect yourself and to keep your germs to yourself if you do get sick.



USE THE RIGHT SOAP

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has declared that there's no evidence antibacterial soap eradicates bacteria any better than regular soap, and it may contribute to the rise in antibiotic-resistant superbugs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends scrubbing with basic soap and water for a full 20 seconds to reduce the number of bacteria or viruses you may have picked up on your hands.



AVOID THE HANDSHAKE

It's becoming more common—and less socially awkward—to skip hand-to-hand contact during cold and flu season.



KEEP YOUR DISTANCE

Respiratory viruses, like colds and flu, can spread easily through the air. When someone who is sick exhales, they breathe out microscopic droplets of fluid containing the virus, and anyone else within their 'breathing zone' can then breathe in that infected air. To stay healthy this winter, put about six feet between you and any sick person who is likely to breathe, cough, or sneeze in your direction.



KNOW THAT GERMS CAN LINGER

Another reason to wash your hands frequently is that surfaces stay germier for longer than you might think. According to the CDC, flu viruses can live on hard surfaces (such as doorknobs or phones) for two to eight hours. A 2013 article published in the American Journal of Infection Control noted that the bug that causes norovirus—an extremely contagious viral infection that brings diarrhea and vomiting—can survive for up to seven days on a hard, dry surface. It also found that the bacteria that cause MRSA—a type of staph infection—have been found to survive for months. Even cold germs can live for anywhere from two hours to seven days on hard surfaces, and for about two hours on skin.



COVER COUGHS AND SNEEZES PROPERLY

Cough or sneeze into the crook of your elbow. When you cough or sneeze, that air comes out with a good degree of force, spreading virus particles to anyone within a three- to six-foot range, according to the Influenza Division at the CDC. Sneezing or coughing into your hand will help keep the germs from going airborne, but if you don't wash your hands immediately, you'll spread the germs the minute you touch anything or anyone.



GET VACCINATED

Although there's no guaranteed protection against influenza, the annual flu vaccine is still your best defense. It takes two weeks after the shot for your immune system to build up the necessary, protective antibodies, so if you haven't gotten one yet, sooner rather than later is best.



KNOW WHEN TO STAY HOME

At the height of your symptoms, you need to stay home for one or two days so as not to infect others. And while you're home recovering, take precautions to help the rest of the household stay healthy. Don't take charge of the family's food prep while you're sick, and try to hole up in one room as much as possible in order to keep your germs to yourself.



CLEAN OFTEN-TOUCHED SURFACES

Because bacteria and viruses stick around on surfaces for hours or even days, targeted cleaning is key. This means specifically cleaning and disinfecting areas where there is a risk of infection transmission. Say, for example, that a coworker or family member has a respiratory infection. At the office, it would be wise to regularly (at least daily) wipe down shared workspaces and equipment, such as copy machines that everyone in the office touches. At home, focus on hard surfaces—like doorknobs, faucets, and TV remotes—on which bacteria live the longest. Just as with hand-washing, you can skip the antibacterial cleaning products.