

Tips for Staying Well During Cold and Flu Season

The cold and flu season lasts from November until April.

- Colds are a minor illness caused by a virus. Symptoms are sneezing, runny nose and congestion, and may also include a headache, cough and sore throat. Colds usually last about a week. There is no way to completely prevent colds.
- Influenza or “flu” is also a virus, but it can make you sicker than a cold. Symptoms include fever, chills, fatigue and body ache. The flu vaccine or “flu shot” can help prevent flu.

Your immune system defends your body against illness. It is the immune system’s job to keep viruses out. If viruses do get in, the immune system seeks out and destroys them. A healthy diet is important to keep your immune system working at its best.

This factsheet gives some nutrition tips on how to make your immune system stronger. This may help to prevent or shorten the length of time you have colds or flu.



Steps you can take

To prevent colds and flu:

- Follow Canada’s Food Guide. Eat foods from each of the four food groups to get all of the nutrients your body needs. Vitamins, minerals and protein are important for a healthy immune system.
- Be physically active. It can help the immune system stay strong and ready to fight infections if they occur.
- Reduce stress: If you have a lot of stress, it can weaken your immune system. That makes you more likely to catch a cold or the flu.
- Get enough sleep.

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 15 seconds. When you are not near a sink, use hand sanitizer. You can get a cold or flu virus by touching your eyes or nose after you touch a surface that has germs on it.
- Avoid close contact with people who have a cold or flu.

Can any foods or supplements help with colds?

Some foods and supplements, such as vitamin C, zinc and probiotics, North American ginseng, and Echinacea may:

- Help you have fewer colds
- Help the cold go away more quickly
- Reduce cold symptoms

Vitamin C: Vitamin C is found in many fruits and vegetables. You need about 200 mg per day to help fight colds. Some of the best sources are sweet peppers, strawberries, kiwi, oranges and broccoli. For more information about food sources of vitamin C, check the Additional Resources below. If you don't eat enough vitamin C-rich foods, you can also take a supplement.

Zinc: Zinc is a mineral that's found in oysters, fish, seafood, beef, pumpkin seeds and baked beans. It is also found in zinc lozenges, syrup and supplements. Taking a zinc supplement within 24 hours of getting a cold may help you have fewer symptoms. The recommended dose is not yet known. Speak with your doctor or pharmacist for more advice. Do not take more than 40 milligrams per day. This may not be safe. Do not use a zinc nasal spray since it may cause a loss of smell.

Probiotics: Probiotics are good bacteria that help keep your immune system healthy. To fight colds, the dose needs to be about 10 billion active probiotic cultures per day. This amount can be found in some yogurt with added probiotics. Check the label. Regular yogurt does not contain enough probiotic to see these effects. Probiotics can also be found in capsules and pills.

To help fight colds, you have to take probiotics every day for at least three months before the cold season begins. There are many different

types of probiotics. Not all of them have these beneficial effects on colds. Look for products that specifically contain

- Lactobacillus gasseri, CECT5714 or PA16/8
- Lactobacillus acidophilus, 74-2 or NCFM
- Lactobacillus casei, DN 114
- Bifidobacterium longum, SP07/3,
- Bifidobacterium bifidum MF 20/5

North American ginseng: North American ginseng is an herb. It is available as capsules, liquid or tea. You need to take at least 100 mg of North American ginseng extract on a daily basis during cold season to see a benefit in fighting colds.

Echinacea: Echinacea is a flowering plant. It is available in tablets, extract, juice, tincture and tea formats. There are many different types of Echinacea products on the market. Each comes from different plant species and varying parts of the plant. For the most benefit, choose supplements or teas made from the flower or stems of the Echinacea purpurea plant.

Can any foods or supplements help with the flu?

More research is needed before any supplements can be recommended for preventing or treating the flu. The best way to protect against flu is to get a flu shot. The flu shot does not give you the flu.

If you do take supplements to help fight colds or flu, make sure they have a Natural Product Number (NPN) from Health Canada. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking supplements to know what's right for you.

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Notes

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