Preventing Colds & Flu
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AYURVEDA

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A balanced immune system is your best friend in the quest for health and the conquest of disease

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Everyone has respiratory infections. statistics show that an average adult can expect to get two to three colds per year. When the body is invaded by disease, the immune system makes every effort to destroy both the germs and the infected cells.

Because we are surrounded by bacterium and viruses constantly, even when we are healthy, these impurities can't be the sole cause of disease. Otherwise, we would always be sick. We become ill when there is a breakdown in our immune system due to some physical imbalance. Ayurvedic medicine is a science of balance. Whenever we have a disease, there is an imbalance inviting that disease to occur.

Ayurvedic medicine believes that the digestive system, especially the stomach, plays an important role in our overall health. We create stress on our digestive system when we fail to follow the laws of nature. Such failure would include the consumption of unhealthy foods, food taken in improper combinations or food incorrectly prepared. Excessive use of sugar can also cause problems. Other factors, such as stress resulting from work, family discord or environment influences, can also have a negative effect. These imbalances create ama (the ayurvedic term for a kind of undigested mucus toxin). Because this mucus is a natural breeding ground for viruses and bacteria, it can become a cause for upper respiratory infections. Medical science has recognized several hundred different types of viruses and bacterium which can cause these afflictions.

As we've seen this year, flu shots are limited. I feel that vaccinations are only important for the elderly, especially if their natural immunity has been compromised due to cancer, heart disease, asthma, lung infections, smoking or bronchitis. These patients have a high mortality rate due to pneumonia.

If a young person who has not been vaccinated contracts an upper respiratory infection, he or she generally recovers more quickly than those who have been vaccinated. Similarly, patients who take antibiotics experience delayed healing as compared with those who receive herbal medicines. Most upper respiratory infections are viral and do not need antibiotics. During my twenty-four years of practice, I have never used influenza vaccinations for myself or my family. In spite of exaggerated exposure to these germs, I have warded off the flu with care and natural remedies only. Most people recover from a common cold or the flu within a week.

When I am asked how these common illnesses might be avoided, this is the advice that I give:

" Perform breathing exercises (outside if possible), and circulate more fresh air throughout your home. Exercise regularly. Walking for 45 minutes a day will increase the body's immune defense mechanism. However, do not over-exert yourself. Exercising longer than 90 minutes per day may actually increase your risk of upper respiratory infections.

" Reduce the "allergenic load " in your house. Carpets, gas heaters, wood burning fireplaces, fungi, mold and chemicals of any kind can weaken your immune system. Consider using electrostatic and charcoal filters in your house to clean the air.

" Reduce your sugar and dairy intake. Eat fruits and vegetables instead. Winter is a holiday season when we tend to consume a lot of sugar. According to published studies, seven tablespoons of sugar a day retards the immune system dramatically. One can of soda pop contains nearly four tablespoons of sugar. Avoid foods you are allergic to. You may need to ask your doctor what these are.

" Take antioxidants! My personal favorite is Amla Plex, available from my company, Ayush Herbs Inc. It is a natural source of anti-oxidants and an excellent immune builder. Take one teaspoon three times a day during the winter. Add to this vitamin C (up to 1,000 mg), vitamin E (400 IU), selenium (200 mcg), and natural carotenoids (25,000 IU). Ayurvedic herbs can also be taken, such as trifala (500 mg three times per day), holy basil standardized extract (250 mg three times per day) and turmeric extract (250 mg three times per day). When you have a cold or an upper respiratory infection, drink ginger, licorice and holy basil tea. Garlic and green tea also have immune balancing properties. Drink plenty of warm fluids.

" Wash your hands frequently. At Purdue University, in a study of 60 day-care centers, researchers found that people who washed their hands frequently got 50 percent fewer colds than those who didn't. I do not like antibacterial soaps because they sometimes force the body to develop drug-resistant bacteria. Avoid frequent touching of your nose, eyes and ears.

" Get at least seven to eight hours of sleep every night. Studies have shown that a lack of sleep can increase your chances of catching a cold.

" For many, the holiday season can be stressful. Mental and emotional weaknesses have an effect on the physical system and actually increase the risk of catching cold. Perform yoga or tai chi and spend quality time with your friends and family. Surround yourself with people you care about and those who care about you. A Carnegie Mellon study published in The Journal of American Medical Association found that people who report three or less social ties, such as with friends, family, coworkers or community groups, are more than four times at risk of catching a cold than those with six or more such ties.

" Do not use antibiotics indiscriminately. Antibiotics have no benefits and can weaken your immune system. According to a study published by The Journal of American Medical Association, 50 percent of the patients suffering with colds, upper respiratory infections and bronchitis demanded antibiotic prescriptions. Most of the upper respiratory infections are caused by viruses. Antibiotics are effective against bacteria. Overuse of antibiotics may lead to antibiotic-resistant bacteria which can be life threatening.

The key is to keep a balance in all that you do. It can come from a healthy mind and body, with meditation, stress reduction, exercises and eating nutritious foods. A few exceptions are fine, as long as they are not in excess. Learn to listen to your body's needs. Your body is your best doctor.

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