

Cold, Flu and Sinusitis prevention and symptom relief

by Miles Hassell MD

First, boost your immune system

Improving our immunity is something we can all do, all the time. Following are some immune-boosting strategies to reduce our risk of getting severe forms of infections, particularly viral infections. Notice the use of the word “severe”: it seems to be perfectly normal to get *mild* versions of viruses, especially when we are children. Apparently a runny nose now and then is akin to our immune system having a healthy workout at the gym. Each of the following suggestions is based on solid scientific data.

- **Eat real food.** Follow a Mediterranean-style whole food diet emphasizing beans, vegetables, whole fruit (not juice!), and whole grains (preferably intact). Also important are good fats like oil-rich fish, extra-virgin olive oil, and raw nuts, as there appears to be a vital interplay between fiber, various families of micronutrients, and healthy fats. High-quality sources of protein are *real* eggs and unprocessed meat. We suggest using extra-virgin olive oil instead of other vegetable oils, and avoiding hydrogenated oils. Read *all* ingredient labels. For much more on the subject read the first section of *Good Food, Great Medicine* (3rd edition). Good food is discussed on pages 20–41, and food to avoid on pages 42–49.

- **Avoid refined carbohydrates.** Minimize all forms of refined carbohydrates like white flour, white rice, sugar, and most fast foods. All of these foods tend to acutely raise blood sugars, which has the effect of suppressing immune response, perhaps through a negative impact on white blood cell activity. In addition, these foods are low in overall nutrition, so our total trace nutrient intake goes down when we eat refined carbohydrates. (Trace nutrients are important. Increased zinc, for example, which is prominent in foods like oysters and red meat, is associated

with fewer infections in the elderly.¹) Again, read ingredient labels on *everything* you eat.

- **Get enough sleep.** Keep your immune system in optimal shape with 7–9 hours of sleep daily. Sleep deprivation is associated with more viral infections.

- **Exercise daily.** Exercise is a broad immune system booster. Any amount will help: we recommend 30–60 minutes of brisk walking on every day ending in Y. No excuses and no exceptions. If walking doesn't work for you, there are countless other options, including upper body exercises.

- **Eat probiotic foods** daily. These provide the beneficial bugs (live cultures) that grow in traditionally fermented foods and help restore normal levels of “friendly” bacteria in your body. The most common sources of probiotics are plain yogurt and kefir. (Kefir is a yogurt-like drink but with a different spectrum of good bacteria; ideally, we should eat both.) For the best quality product with the most dependably active cultures, make sure the only ingredients listed are milk and live cultures. Here in Oregon, our favorite brand is the locally-produced *Nancy's*. Always read ingredient labels! Many yogurts (especially fat-free versions) have added sweeteners, thickeners, and artificial flavors. A six-ounce container of pre-sweetened yogurt can include 7–9 teaspoons of added sugar! Ouch! Sweeten yogurt yourself with honey and/or fruit. Other sources of probiotics are salt-cured sauerkraut (like the *Bubbies* brand) and kimchee.

- **Wash your hands often!** Vigorous washing with simple soap and water is enough to kill cold and flu viruses. The virus spreads primarily by droplets, so carry tissues with you and cover your mouth with a tissue (or your sleeve, if necessary)

¹ Am J Clin Nutr 2007;85:837-44

when you cough or sneeze. Remember to toss tissues directly in the trash.

Flu symptoms: Fever, cough, rhinitis (runny nose), body aches, headache, chills, fatigue, and sore throat, but vomiting and diarrhea are reported as well.

Cold symptoms: The common cold usually causes nasal congestion, runny nose, and sneezing. A sore throat may be present on the first day but usually resolves quickly. If a cough occurs, it generally develops on about the fourth or fifth day of symptoms, typically when congestion and runny nose are resolving.

Treating cold and flu symptoms

Remember that in most cases, people who come down with colds or flu recover uneventfully with rest and good food. If you do get sick, it is important to take seriously the suggestions under *First, boost your immune system* on the previous page. For cold and flu symptoms:

- **Rest and plenty of fluids** are the main treatments. The fluids-of-choice should ideally be water and hot herbal teas, lightly sweetened with honey, if preferred. Avoid sweet drinks like fruit juices, Gatorade-type drinks, and sodas, diet or otherwise. If you have a fever, *stay home!* Don't return to work until you have gone 24 hours with no fever (and without using fever-reducing agents).

- **Antibiotics** are generally of no value in the treatment of colds and flu, so make the most of evidence-based natural treatments that may help reduce the symptoms.

- **Good food** is your best medicine, and refined carbohydrates are the enemies of a struggling immune system. (See tips on previous page.)

- **Vitamin D** may have a role in both prevention and treatment of viral illness. If you don't already take robust quantities (1,000 units daily or more) of vitamin D, or know that your vitamin D levels are low, then a supplement of 5,000 units daily for a week at the beginning of the

infection is a reasonable step.² Having a blood level of 25-OH Vitamin D in the region of 50 ng/ml is a reasonable target. That usually takes either quite a bit of sun exposure without sunscreen, 1,000-2,000 units of vitamin D daily as a supplement, or about 1 tablespoon each day of cod liver oil.

- **Nasal saline spray** used every two hours or so can help. Steam inhalation, hot baths, and frequent hot drinks may also give relief.

Use nasal saline daily: This helps keep the mucous layer in the nose healthy and minimizes the accumulation of material in the nasal passages. Two over-the-counter products that work together to achieve this are nasal saline spray and sinus rinse. Use both for best results.

- **Nasal saline spray:** (Look for *Ayr*, *Ocean*, and others which are available over the counter at your local pharmacy.) Use 2–4 times daily.

- **Nasal saline rinse:** If your sinuses are congested, we strongly recommend something called **Sinus Rinse**, which is found in the cold section of your pharmacy. The most successful option seems to be the simple and inexpensive *NeilMed Sinus Rinse kit*, available at most pharmacies and neilmed.com. You can also mix a simple salt solution at home and use a little device called a *neti pot*. There is even a very effective nasal irrigator that you can attach to a *Waterpik*.

Some natural remedies

- **Echinacea** may be effective for the prevention of colds by about 50%.³, and many people swear by it for treatment, as well.

- **Ocilloccocinum** is supported by enthusiastic anecdotes, and there is patchy but promising research evidence.⁴

- **Elderberry Standardized Extract** (Sambucol Pro) is tasty, and probably works. Adults should use 1 tablespoon 4 times daily for 1–2 weeks.

² Cannell. *Epid Infect* 2006;134:1129-40

³ *Lancet Inf Dis* 2007;7:473-80

⁴ *Cochrane Database* 2004

▪ **Horseradish, wasabi and hot peppers** are all longstanding folk remedies that may help reduce congestion. Try stirring ⅛ teaspoon of hot pepper sauce (like Tabasco) into a glass of water before drinking it. Horseradish is pretty tasty with beef or meatloaf; use as much as you can enjoy. Wasabi is great with sushi.

▪ **Zinc lozenges**, such as *Cold-Eeze*, can shorten the duration of a cold for some. Take one lozenge every two hours, (up to 4–6 lozenges daily) for a maximum of one week.⁵

▪ **Vitamin C** is unpredictable and most studies for cold and flu are negative, although there may be more benefit in those who are physically active.⁶ Should you want to try Vitamin C, it is reasonable to use 500–1,000 mg 3–4 times daily for 5–7 days. There is intriguing data to suggest that Vitamin C is more effective against colds and flu when combined with 200 units/daily of Vitamin E. (*Note:* Because of our concern over the routine use of nutritional supplements, we suggest only short term use of this treatment.)

▪ For **diarrhea** we recommend something called the **BRATT** diet, which includes **B**ananas, **R**ice, **A**pplesauce, **T**ea, and **T**oast. Cooked carrots can help, too. Keep fluid intake up, even if you can only handle one tablespoon of water every 15 minutes.

Cough and sore throat suggestions

▪ **Honey** can soothe a cough more effectively than the conventional cough medicine dextromethorphan. Use about a teaspoon every 4–6 hours or so, as necessary. Taken at bedtime, it also helps some people to sleep.⁷

▪ Coughs also may respond to **dark chocolate**, due to the methylxanthine content. Try ½–1 ounce of chocolate *with a cocoa content of 70% or greater* every 4–6 hours. To figure out what ½-ounce of chocolate is, look at the total weight of the bar, and then calculate the proportion.⁸

Note: Remember that, although small amounts of honey and dark chocolate are good for you,

they are also calorie-dense. When you use them, eat a little less of something else.

Hot Lemon & Honey Soother

Try making your own *Hot Lemon & Honey Soother*. Some patients enjoy up to four hours of relief from coughing or sore throat with this tonic.

- Wash and thinly slice one fresh lemon, including peel.
- Place slices in a jug or thermos and add 4 cups of boiling water.
- Add 4 tablespoons (¼ cup) of honey and stir until honey is dissolved. (It may taste too sweet, but the honey has an important role in the soothing.)
- Keep the *Soother* in a thermos and sip as needed. The peel contributes a slightly bitter taste, but that is part of the therapeutic benefit. (The longer the mixture sits the more the flavor from the peel will intensify.)

Note: If you don't have access to any lemons, ½ cup apple cider vinegar makes a fine substitute.

▪ **Apple cider vinegar** is a folk medicine favorite and works well for some. At the first warning of a sore throat, mix 2 tablespoons of vinegar (preferably unfiltered) with 1 cup of warm water. (If it tastes too sour add a teaspoon of honey to the vinegar first and stir to dissolve before adding water.) Gargle every hour – and swallow, don't spit; the apple cider vinegar also acts as a tonic.

▪ **Salt water:** Stir ½ teaspoon of salt into a half-cup of warm water and gargle as needed.

▪ **Aspirin** can be a pain reliever for sore throats: dissolve 1 or 2 aspirin (325 mg) in ½ cup warm water, and gargle as needed.

▪ **Chicken soup** seems to be effective for reducing cold symptoms. The mechanisms probably include improving the white blood cell response and the ability of the body to clear mucous from nasal and airway passages.⁹ It does matter, however, what is actually *in* the chicken soup. We recommend that any

⁵ www.Consumerlab.com, 10/06

⁶ Cochrane Database 2007

⁷ Paul, I. Archives Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine 2007; 161: 140-46

⁸ Usmani. FASEB J 2005;19:231-33

⁹ Rennard et al. Chest 2000;118:1150-55

prescription for chicken soup follow the general model of our recipe that follows.

A Simple, Soothing Chicken Soup

The vegetables reduce by half after they're cooked, and are important for fiber and immune-boosting nutrients.

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
2 cups onion in 1/4-inch dice
2 cups celery in 1/4-inch dice
1 tablespoon freshly crushed garlic
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
1/4-1/2 teaspoon Tabasco sauce (optional)
4 cups chicken stock
2 cups shredded cooked chicken

- Heat oil in a heavy 5-quart pot over medium-high heat. Add onions and celery and sauté 15 minutes or until vegetables are tender.
- Reduce heat to medium. Add garlic and sauté another 15 seconds. Add salt, pepper, Tabasco, and stock. Bring to a simmer.
- Add chicken and continue cooking at a bare simmer for 10 minutes. (*Serves about 2.*)

Treating sinusitis symptoms

The *Tips to boost your immune system* listed at the beginning of this handout are also useful for sinusitis. Most sinus infections respond well to the remedies we use for colds and flu. Sometimes we also use decongestants, antihistamines, and antibiotics.

Sinus infection symptoms

- Nasal congestion or blockage
 - Thick yellow/green discharge from the nose
 - Pain in the teeth
 - Pain or pressure in the face that is worse when bending forwards
 - Other acute sinusitis symptoms can include fever (temperature greater than 100.4°F or 38°C), fatigue, cough, difficulty or inability to smell, ear pressure or fullness, headache, and bad breath.
- Note:* In most cases, these symptoms develop over the course of one day and begin to improve within seven to 10 days.

Antibiotics and probiotics

If you need to take antibiotics for any reason, it is especially important to include probiotic-rich foods (see page one) in your diet while on the antibiotic and for a week or two afterwards. This will help maintain a healthy immune system and avoid unnecessary diarrhea and yeast infections that sometimes are associated with antibiotic use.

What if I don't get better?

If a few days go by and you are failing to see any improvement, have high fevers or any unusual or worrisome symptoms, then it would probably be wise to see your physician.

On-line resources

Check out the following websites for more helpful information regarding cold, flu and sinusitis treatment:

uptodate.com/patients
cdc.gov

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Dr. Hassell established the [Integrative Medicine Program](#) at Providence Cancer Center in Portland and is a clinical instructor in the training of Internal Medicine residents, twice named *Outstanding Teacher of the Year*. He also lectures widely to physician groups about the appropriate integration of lifestyle and conventional medicine, and is often interviewed on health issues by local television and radio. He is the co-author of *Good Food, Great Medicine*, an evidence-based guide to using a whole food Mediterranean diet in the pursuit of optimal health.

In his private practice Dr. Hassell encourages the vigorous use of evidence-based food and lifestyle choices and has been chosen as one of *Portland's Top Doctors*. Dr. Hassell is available for individual consultations for diagnosis, second opinion, or to develop patient-centered solutions using evidence-based conventional and lifestyle interventions.

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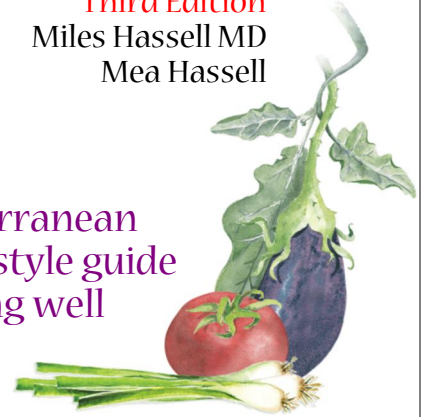
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