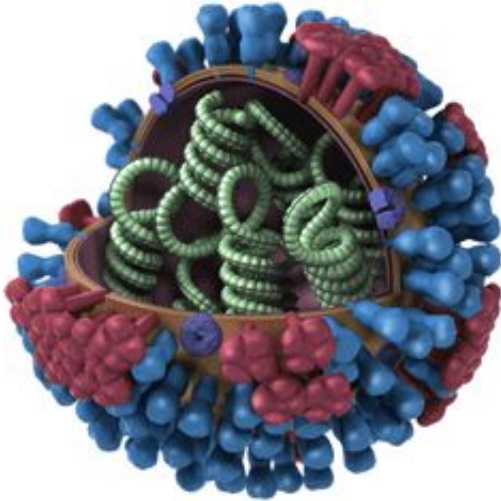


How to fight winter's ailments

February 17 2011, By Sara Peach



This image provides a 3D graphical representation of the biology and structure of a generic influenza virus. Source: <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/images.h>

The weather in North Carolina may be warm today, but some areas of the state saw snow less than a week ago. And we're likely to see more cold weather, maybe even more snow, before winter officially comes to an end on March 20.

But winter doesn't have to mean poor health. Read on for your guide to avoiding common ailments and maintaining wellness for the rest of the season.

Fending off the flu

On average, 50 percent of U.S. influenza cases occur during the month of February, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Influenza, commonly known as the flu, can cause a fever, cough, sore throat, fatigue, stuffy nose or muscle aches. The disease can worsen underlying conditions, such as asthma or congestive heart failure.

“This is the most severe of the respiratory diseases,” said David Weber, MD, MPH, professor of infectious diseases and pediatrics in the UNC School of Medicine and professor of epidemiology at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health.

In the U.S., influenza is responsible for about 220,000 hospitalizations and an average of 36,000 deaths each year. People over the age of 65, pregnant women, people with blood, endocrine, kidney, liver, or metabolic disorders, as well as those with chronic lung or heart diseases, certain neurological conditions, or morbid obesity are more likely to suffer from flu complications.

But the disease can strike anyone, including young, healthy people, Weber said.

Four children have died from the flu this year in North Carolina, according to state health officials.

Unless you have certain medical conditions, such as an egg allergy, you should receive a flu vaccination if you're older than six months of age, Weber said.

Your health care provider or pharmacist can give you the vaccine. To find a clinic, visit www.flu.nc.gov .

Treating dry skin

For many people, the harsh weather of winter months causes an irritating problem: rough or reddened skin that can flake, peel or crack. Cold air contains less moisture than warm air, which may contribute to dry skin, said Craig Burkhart, MD, an assistant professor of dermatology at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. Cold temperatures may also interfere with the flow of natural oils on the skin.

Washing your skin can contribute to dryness, Burkhart said, because detergents and soaps remove the oil from your skin.

To prevent dry skin, avoid excessive washing. You should also choose a cleanser that does not contain sodium lauryl sulfate, Burkhart said. That substance, which creates foam, is a skin irritant and can strip your skin of natural oils.

If your skin is still dry, you should treat it with a moisturizing cream or lotion. Creams, which are packaged in jars or squeeze tubes, are more effective for healing dry skin than lotions, Burkhart said. Lotions are usually sold in pump containers.

Finally, you should see a dermatologist if your skin develops cracks or fissures. You should also seek medical help if you notice a rash, which could be a sign of other skin conditions, or if your dry skin is detracting from the quality of your life, Burkhart said.

Exercising in frigid temperatures

Getting regular exercise is important to staying healthy through the winter months. But is it dangerous to exercise outdoors in [cold weather](#)?

“Around here, absolutely not,” said Kathy DeBlasio, MA, ATC, lifestyle enhancement director at the UNC Wellness Center at Meadowmont.

If you have certain conditions, such as asthma, Raynaud's disease or heart problems, you should check with your doctor before exercising in the cold. A medical professional can help you take the proper precautions before you set out.

In general, the key to exercising safely in cold weather is to wear several layers of clothing, DeBlasio said. Start with a layer of thin synthetic material. Don't wear cotton close to your skin, because it will absorb sweat and cause you to chill quickly. Over the first layer, add a thicker garment for insulation. Then add a third, waterproof layer. You should wear mittens – not gloves – so that your fingers can keep each other warm.

If you ride a bicycle outdoors, you may also need a windproof jacket, shoe covers and gloves or mittens, DeBlasio said.

Don't forget to drink plenty of water.

“We're losing fluids – especially through evaporation in the cold and dry air – even though we don't feel hot and thirsty,” she said.

And if you are having trouble breathing, your fingers are turning white and waxy, or you are shivering in the middle of your workout, that means you may have gotten too cold.

“If you start shivering, it's time to go in,” DeBlasio said.

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine

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