

Arm yourself against colds and flu this fall

September 26 2011, By Katie Wooldridge

The first few breezes of fall bring with them not only the promise of a welcome change in season, but also the threat of colds and flu.

Dr. Joshua Septimus, an internist at The Methodist Hospital in Houston, offers a few simple suggestions to protect you and your family this cold and [flu](#) season.

“The most useful tip I can pass along is to wash your hands,” says Septimus. “It sounds so simple, but it is truly the most important thing you can do to protect yourself.”

He also offers these suggestions:

- Get vaccinated. Septimus says a flu shot is the best medicine for protection against the flu.
- Disinfect tabletops and common areas of contact every day.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Stay home when sick and avoid individuals who are infected.

Each year, colds and flu are serious business because they affect business seriously: a recent study discovered that last year’s U.S. flu season caused 100 million lost work days, almost \$7 billion in lost wages and 32 million missed school days.

In the same study, 80 percent of respondents said they went to work sick. “Not only does going to work while sick increase the risk to everyone around you, it also doesn’t help you get over a cold or flu any

faster,” Septimus explains.

If you do come down with a cold, Septimus recommends the tried and true remedies: rest, and lots of fluids. Water, juice or warm lemon water with honey helps loosen congestion and prevents dehydration.

He suggests you use over-the-counter medications sparingly. While many nonprescription decongestants and pain relievers offer some relief from symptoms, they won't prevent a cold or shorten its duration. And most have some side effects – if they are used for more than a few days, they can actually make symptoms worse.

Many physicians, including Septimus, aren't convinced that over-the-counter remedies containing zinc are effective. Despite some research showing zinc to be beneficial in treating colds, other studies warn that high doses of zinc can affect the senses of smell and taste.

“I recommend you avoid anything that may cause a serious side effect,” Septimus adds.

Cold symptoms start typically with a sore throat, as well as a runny nose and congestion. By the third or fourth day, a typical cold sufferer will have a cough and children are likely to have a bit of fever.

Flu symptoms come on quickly, and are usually more severe than a [cold](#). Symptoms of the flu include a fever, headache, sore throat, muscle aches, cough and congestion.

Viruses that cause colds and flu enter the body through the mucous membranes of the nose, eyes and mouth. Touching your hand to one of these areas can infect you with a virus, which is why it's important to wash your hands frequently to keep from infecting yourself and others.

The normal, routine activities recommended to keep healthy – exercise and a nutritious diet – are also good defenses against colds and flu. Combine those with a little precaution and common sense, and you have a powerful prescription for the long [cold and flu season](#) ahead.

Provided by Methodist Hospital System

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