

How to stop or slow sickness from going around this winter

December 20 2013, by Nancy Churnin

It's hard to fend off illnesses when sniffles and coughs are "going around," says Dr. Ray Tsai, who rushed his 1-year-old daughter to the doctor when she developed croup, a respiratory disease that left her struggling to breathe during this cold season.

"There's a lot of seasonality to disease," says Tsai, president and medical director of Children's Medical Center's MyChildren's, a group of clinics that provide [health care](#) to underserved children throughout the Dallas area. "We're seeing a lot of upper-respiratory infections right now because people run around more at this time of year. Kids share runny noses, [sore throats](#) and ear infections in school. Someone who had a certain virus a year ago may be immune but can pass it on to someone else."

Even so, you're not defenseless: You can improve your chances of staying healthy in the coming months, Tsai and other local experts agree.

Each of the health professionals interviewed for this story recommends and takes flu vaccines. Their other advice ranges from tips to guard against the spread of sickness to ways to strengthen the [immune system](#).

To start, it's helpful to understand the biggest thing you're up against: viruses.

Viruses are tiny infectious agents that replicate inside the body and attack it with everything from the common cold to the flu. There isn't a

cure for the common cold, but there's an effective vaccination that guards against as many as four strains of flu this year.

Flu can prove fatal. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommended a [flu shot](#) for everyone 6 months of age and older in September. Last year, 45 percent of all Americans had [flu vaccinations](#), according to the CDC. It takes a few weeks for the shot to be fully effective, but it is recommended through January, as the [flu season](#) can last through April.

It's considered especially important for those with heart disease, asthma or diabetes as well as [health care professionals](#) and pregnant women. It's also important for kids who will be around seniors with compromised immune systems.

Dr. Steve Davis, an infectious-disease specialist at Baylor Irving, expresses particular concern for grandparents who will be celebrating alongside young children during the holidays.

"Though the flu may be a nuisance for the child, it could be life-threatening for the elderly adult."

Tamiflu, a prescription medication, can speed recovery. But [flu](#) can also weaken the body, making the person more susceptible to a bacterial infection that can result in bronchitis or pneumonia. These can also prove deadly, Davis says.

Dr. Donna Casey, an internist at Texas Health Dallas, says certain measures can prevent the spread of both kinds of infections and lessen their severity.

Among them:

Swab cellphones with alcohol.

Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze.

Don't touch your nose or face after handling a keyboard or door.

Wash your hands frequently.

Refrain from attending parties when you're feeling sick, and don't share glasses or utensils.

Wash your hands and use hand sanitizer to protect against viruses and bacteria that may lurk on toilet and sink handles, elevator buttons and ball pits in children's public play places.

Coming into contact with some germs is unavoidable. So to boost immunity, Casey advises her patients, avoid tobacco and alcohol, eat a nutritious diet and avoid sweet foods - because sugar helps viruses and bacteria multiply.

As always, exercise. Exercise strengthens the lymph system, the part of the body that is on the front line of fighting infection, she says.

Gargling with saltwater for 30 seconds to a minute cleans the inside of the nose and provides relief from a buildup of mucus or drying of nasal passages. Sleep, hydration and a good attitude can improve the immune system. Personally, she favors ginseng, which may stop viral replication.

Don't stress. Some of her advice is easier said than done, particularly around the holidays, as people spend more time huddled together, sharing things, partying, indulging in sweets and all too often stressing out, she acknowledges.

Any change in a healthy direction can help, however. And she's learned to take resistance in stride.

That includes the time she suggested that maybe it wasn't such a good idea for congregants to drink from the same communion cup at her church.

"I thought I was being helpful," she says. "But it didn't go over very well."

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