



A Yogi's Guide to Winter Wellness

By Catherine Guthrie

'Tis the season of celebrating with friends and family—and you have a seemingly endless to-do list to get ready for it all. But your festive holiday plans can be quickly derailed if you fall victim to a winter bug

Colds and flus can strike any time of the year. However, winter's cold, dry air creates the perfect host environment for germs. The drier the air, the longer germs stay airborne. And the more close contact you have with other people, the more likely their germs are to migrate to you. To top it off, cold weather can throw your health out of balance.

According to the principles of Ayurveda, winter can aggravate conditions that can weaken your immune system—so it's essential to take good care of yourself at this time of year. With that goal in mind, here are some of our favorite solutions to keep your immune system strong and your energy up all winter long.

10 ways to build a strong immune system, naturally, so you can thrive this season.

1 Pick a Natural Kick

Energy wanes in the winter, when sunlight is scarce. But jump-starting your engine every day with a triple espresso may undermine your immune system. Caffeine stresses the adrenals, the glands that sit atop the kidneys and support the body's immunity and energy, explains herbalist Madelon Hope. "Cold weather already compromises the kidneys, the source of our energy and vitality." In lieu of lattes, she suggests brewing a cup of nettle tea the next time an afternoon coffee craving strikes. "It's a gentle energizer for those midafternoon lows," she says.

2 Strike a Heart-Opening Pose

An easy way to avoid getting colds and flu is to weave more heart-opening poses, such as Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose), Matsyasana (Fish Pose), and Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose), into your yoga practice, says Hema Sundaram, an integrative physician in Washington, D.C. Heart openers stimulate blood flow to the thymus, an organ nestled behind the breastbone that is instrumental in the growth of T-cells, the immune system's frontline, she says. Sundaram suggests practicing all three asanas once daily for prevention, twice daily if you feel a cold or flu creeping on. "Doing all three poses only takes five minutes and may make the difference between staying well and getting sick this winter," she says.

3 Make the Most of Mushrooms

Mushrooms supercharge your immune system by increasing the number of disease-fighting white blood cells in your bloodstream. Maximizing your intake of mushrooms is easy: Just add them to your next pot of vegetable soup, says Madelon Hope, the director of the Boston School of Herbal Studies. Toss in dried mushrooms at the start and simmer to release their full range of beneficial compounds. Add sliced fresh mushrooms near the end to preserve their delicate shape and flavor. "You'll have a homemade immunity



tonic,” Hope says. She counts shiitake, maitake, and oyster mushrooms among her favorites. For an extra immunity boost, look for dried medicinal mushrooms, such as chaga and reishi. Medicinal mushrooms also come in supplement form, and their pro-immunity punch equals that of fresh ones, says Woodson Merrell, an integrative physician and the director of the Continuum Center for Health and Healing at Beth Israel in Manhattan.

4. Soothe Your Sinuses

Most colds enter the body through the nose’s mucous membranes. A neti pot, a traditional Indian spouted vessel used to rinse the sinus passages, helps to clear the area of excess mucus and viruses. Early this year a study found that kids with colds and flu who regularly used a nasal wash got well faster, took less medication, and fought off future colds better than those who didn’t. For a foolproof approach to nasal rinsing, try a squeeze bottle and pre-measured salt packets, like those made by NeilMed Pharmaceuticals. Lean over a sink and irrigate one nostril at a time. Rinse twice a day for cold and flu prevention, says Terence Davidson, MD, director of the Nasal Dysfunction Clinic at the University of California, San Diego.

5. Try a 10-Minute Meditation

Stress is the immune system’s worst enemy. Whether you’re dealing with a brief bout of craziness like Christmas shopping, or a longer-lasting stressor like divorce, your body’s ability to fight germs is compromised by physical and mental tension. Meditation can help. One study found that people who attended an eight-week mindfulness meditation class (a three-hour class once a week, plus daily meditation for an hour) ended up with stronger immune systems than those people who didn’t meditate. Researchers believe that the meditation-induced relaxation boosted the group’s immunity. Over time, high levels of stress hormones dampen the immune system, says Timothy McCall, MD, Yoga Journal’s medical editor and author of *Yoga as Medicine*. “So it makes sense that by practicing mindfulness-based stress reduction, your immune system benefits.” Research shows that even 10 minutes of daily meditation reduces the physical symptoms of stress. (To learn meditation techniques, go to yogajournal.com, click on “Practice,” and then choose “Meditation.”)

6. Keep Moving

Cold temperatures are no excuse to forgo your exercise routine. The key is to not knock yourself out, especially if family members or co-workers are sick. To prime your immune system, get at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise each day. Recent research found that the risk of catching a cold was three times as high for women who did only low-intensity exercise, like stretching, as for women who combined strength training and moderate cardiovascular exercise, such as walking on a treadmill or pedaling a stationary bike. One theory is that increasing your heart rate speeds up the circulation of white blood cells, making it more likely they will seek and destroy germs early on.

Just be careful not to overdo it. Overexertion lowers the immune system, leaving you more (not less) vulnerable to illness, warns Merrell. “In other words,” he says, “if someone in your family is sick with the flu, skip the three-hour Ashtanga Yoga class.”

7. Explore Ayurveda

When stocking your natural-medicine kit this season, don’t forget the Ayurvedic herbs ashwagandha and turmeric. Both are clinically proven to bolster flagging immunity. Ashwagandha (Indian ginseng) is a powerful immune-system builder, says John Douillard, director of the LifeSpa Ayurvedic center in Boulder, Colorado. “The warm, sweet, heavy root supports the nervous system and gives the body the ability to cope with stress,” he says. To guard against colds and flu, take up to 1,000 milligrams (mg) of ashwagandha extract twice daily after meals. Turmeric is beneficial for its antiviral and antibacterial properties. When cooking with turmeric, you can add a



pinch of black pepper to increase its potency, but you need to take supplements to get a truly medicinal dose. “You’ll never be able to eat enough of it,” Douillard says. So ingest 1,000 mg of turmeric with food as often as three times a day. If you feel a cold coming on, “down a dose every two hours until the cold fizzles.”

8. Have Fun

Plan a fun night with friends or book that workshop with a visiting yoga teacher—it may keep you healthy. Earlier this year researchers at Loma Linda University in California discovered that looking forward to an event boosts immunity. They compared the stress levels of two sets of students—one group was anticipating a positive experience; the other group was feeling neutral. Those in the first group had lower levels of stress hormones, including cortisol and epinephrine (adrenaline), which are known to weaken the immune system over time. “Our studies show that biological changes take place before and in anticipation of an event. Specifically, detrimental stress hormones decrease when you look forward to something you enjoy,” says Lee Berk, the study’s lead author. In 2001 the same researchers discovered that laughter increases immunity. What better excuse to invite some of your friends over to laugh out loud?

9. Just Add Water

To ward off germs close to home, just add water—to the air and to your body. Researchers recently linked the spread of the flu to winter’s low humidity, meaning moisture may be a natural weapon against airborne germs. The theory is that germ-infused droplets from sneezes and coughs stay airborne longer in dry air. But moisture in the air (humidity) makes the droplets grow too large to float, and they fall to the ground. Consequently, you’re less likely to inhale them. A humidifier is the best way to increase your home’s humidity level, says Anice Lowen, a microbiologist at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York. If someone in your family has the flu, running a humidifier in a shared space, like a living room, may help ground germs. When you add moisture to the air, remember to add it to your body, too. Low humidity can also dry the mucous membranes. Woodson Merrell recommends drinking six to eight glasses of water or other noncaffeinated beverage each day to keep your body hydrated.

10. Stay Connected

Loneliness can have an impact on your immune system. In a 2005 study, researchers asked college freshmen to keep daily diaries charting their levels of loneliness, mood, and stress, then followed up with calls and emails to see how each student was faring. Early in the trial, the students got flu shots. To measure how well the students’ bodies responded to the vaccine, the researchers took blood samples throughout the study. The students who had only a small social circle and who reported high levels of loneliness tended to have struggling immune systems. So if you find yourself spending too many nights home alone, make an effort to get out and socialize. Join a book club or a yoga study group or commit to a regular yoga class and connect with your classmates. Dropping an email or note to distant family and friends can be an instant reminder that you really aren’t alone.

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