

Tips to Stay Healthy this Holiday Season

The holidays are here and it's time once again for many of us to load ourselves onto packed airplanes and head to see our families. Even if you manage to survive the recycled airplane air full of winter viruses, those adorable little petri dishes that you call your grandkids, nieces, and nephews will get you every time. You can decrease your exposure however, or at least improve your chances of fending off viruses, with a few simple precautions.

THE AIRPLANE

Airplanes are a convenient, and for many of us a necessary, form of travel. They are also ideal environments for spreading illness. Viruses can live in the air or on surfaces for hours, and they are found in high levels on planes because of the high numbers of people on board and the limited and re-used air. The dryness of the air within an airplane is also a culprit. For those who may already be a little sick, dry mucous membranes can lead to more productive symptoms, including more coughing and sneezing, propelling more viruses into the community air. Even if you are healthy, dry mucous membranes present a decreased barrier to illness, making you even more susceptible to viruses both in the air and on surfaces. Fight dehydration by drinking plenty of water, avoiding alcohol, and moderating your caffeine intake. You can also hydrate your mucous membranes directly using a nasal saline spray before and after the flight. More aggressive nasal irrigation using a neti pot to rinse any germs off your mucous membranes after the flight (and hopefully in the privacy of your destination) can also decrease your chances of becoming ill. Nasal spray and neti pots are readily available at most pharmacies.

The most obvious defense is to avoid as many germs as you can. A good rule of thumb is "If you don't have to touch it, don't." Avoid the use of airplane pillows and blankets and bring your own magazines. The airplane is an appropriate place to use anti-viral hand sanitizers and wipes. Wipe your tray-table, armrests as you sit down, and hands often, especially if you touch anything that isn't yours, and before you eat anything. There is rightful concern about over-use of "antimicrobial" soaps and sanitizers. Stick with regular soap when you can (at home and in the bathroom), and save "anti-microbial" cleaners for times when soap and water aren't available. Soap is as effective, and won't contribute to the development of super-bugs. This will benefit all of us, and your immunity, in the long run.

If you've done your best to avoid exposure, the next step in defending yourself is to improve your immunity. Don't set yourself up for illness by skimping on sleep, even through the stress of the holidays, and do your best to maintain a regular schedule. That red-eye flight might save you a few dollars, but if it leaves you exhausted you are much more susceptible to catching a virus. If a time change might alter your sleep, most people can safely take melatonin (usually 3mg but consult your doctor) about an hour before bedtime in the new time zone to help them fall asleep. This will help your system reset into a circadian rhythm that matches sunset and sunrise in your new location, which will help your immune system function at a higher level.

Finally, pack the days before and after your flight with nutrients. Simple sugars should be avoided as they slow white blood cells, literally crippling our body's ability to respond to attackers. Consuming a lot of colorful vegetables will provide the nutrients your immune system needs. Vegetables such as garlic and onions are also very effective anti-microbials, acting internally to kill germs that you come in contact with.

Consider increasing the intake of immune stimulating herbs or nutrients at least 3-4 days prior to and throughout a trip. A variety of immune products can be effective, including immune stimulating mushroom blends, zinc (50mg per day), garlic (or its active ingredient allicin), or a blend of botanicals. These can improve immune function in general, and many are also anti-microbial. A good, refrigerated probiotic can be beneficial as well (many that are refrigerated will still have a week or so of shelf-life for travel, so check your bottle). Probiotics are the "good bacteria" that inhabit our sinuses and digestive tracts, and taking them preventatively can fill these spaces with the "good guys," so there is less room for the "bad guys" to grow. Taking Vitamin C is also a great way to prevent viral illness, and is the active ingredient in many popular products, like Airborne and Emergen-C. Either of these, or plain Vitamin C, are good choices. C should be taken as 1 gram two or three times during the day to be effective. Too much C can cause digestive issues, so I highly suggest a trial run well before the day of your flight. If you aren't already taking at least a maintenance dose of Vitamin D (2000IU per day), add one for the winter.

THE FAMILY

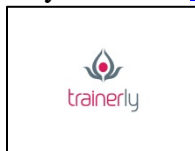
As cute as they are, those little munchkins are your second biggest hurdle to returning home healthy. It is important to realize that a child's immune system is much more efficient than an adult's, so what may cause a runny nose and adorable sneezes in them could very well leave you with a cough for the rest of the winter. If children are in school, they are also carriers of many viruses that you haven't likely been exposed to.

Many of the above strategies for defense apply to visiting family as well. Although it's hard not to touch them, and I wouldn't recommend that you don't, certainly be wary of shared utensils and drinks, and wash your hands, and make sure they wash theirs, often. Use an anti-bacterial wipe or cleaning 'cloth (many are now made with natural cleaners) on the toilet following little ones and try to avoid sharing hand-towels. Maintain a good sleep routine and a high-nutrition diet, and consider the nightly use of a neti pot, as it could be your saving grace. Maintain the intake of your vitamins or herbs of choice throughout your visit, during the ride home, and for at least a few days afterwards. A liquid D (400IU) and powdered probiotic are both easy nutrients to sneak into the kids themselves (with their parents' permission, of course!) and may lessen the diseases they have to spread.

Travel and time spent with children doesn't have to result in illness. However, anytime you have increased exposure you should take increased precautions.

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