

# Prepare Now for a Nasty Cold and Flu Season

By Lynn Allison

Experts warn that this year's cold and flu season could be severe. Many people are already coughing and sneezing, with respiratory diseases making a comeback after the lessening of COVID-19 mitigation procedures.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that the number of cases of influenza in the U.S. plummeted by 98 percent last season. The reasons for the dramatic decline include fewer people traveling, more people wearing masks and social distancing, and more Americans getting the flu shot.

But experts caution that the flu is expected to make a deadly comeback this year. With COVID-19 restrictions lifted and children returning to school, we can expect a particularly harsh season. "Even though it's smoldering out there, it could take off at any time," said William Schaffner, M.D., a professor of infectious diseases at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine.

During the pandemic, the viruses that cause the common cold were at historic lows because of safety measures. But the pathogens have returned, so it's important to prepare for what could be a challenging winter.

While nothing can completely remove the risk of contracting a cold or flu, there are many things you can do to greatly reduce your chances of getting sick.

"Preventive measures, in addition

to getting the flu vaccine annually as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are gold standards for helping to reduce your chances of getting sick during the upcoming season," says Joshua Murdock, doctor of pharmacy, and pharmacy editor at telehealth company GoodRx.

### **Stock your medicine chest.**

Take time while you are healthy to examine your medicine cabinet. Get rid of expired items and make a list of what you need to replace and replenish, advises Sarah Lewis, a pharmacist and medical writer who earned her doctor of pharmacy degree from Massachusetts College of Pharmacy. "Be sure to include fever and pain relief medicines, decongestants, antihistamines, and cough medicines," she adds. Always check with your healthcare provider if you have any questions about interactions between over-the-counter medications and prescription drugs you're taking.

Murdock advises that when you buy combination medications, make sure you aren't using products that contain the same ingredients. "For example, acetaminophen is a fever-reducing medication that is found both as a standalone product as well as in combination medications," he says. More is not always better, so check with your doctor or pharmacist if you are uncertain about dosages.

### **Practice proper handwashing and don't touch your face.**

Murdock reminds people to wash their hands frequently with soap

and water, for at least 20 seconds each time. "This is preferred over using alcohol-based hand sanitizer," he tells *Health Radar*. "Avoid touching your face and always cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze — but don't use your hands!" Sneeze and cough into your elbow. Stay home when you are sick or feverish.

**Get the flu vaccine.** Flu vaccines are recommended for people over age 6 months, says Murdock. "In 2019-2020 alone, flu vaccines prevented an estimated 7.5 million flu-related illnesses," he points out. "It's best to get the shot by the end of October."

**Build up your immunity.** Get at least eight hours of quality sleep a night and stay hydrated, advises **Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D.**, an expert on immunity and the author of "From Fatigued to Fantastic!" Teitelbaum tells *Health Radar* that it's also critical to avoid excess sugar. "The nine teaspoons of sugar in one can of soda or glass of fruit juice suppresses your immune system by 30 percent for three hours," he says. To optimize your immune system, take 15-30 mg of zinc, 200-500 mg of vitamin C, 1,000-4,000 IU of vitamin D, and 2,500 IU of vitamin A daily. But do not exceed 8,000 IUs of vitamin A per day, which could cause birth defects in pregnant women, cautions Teitelbaum.

"These four supplements can improve immunity dramatically," he says. □