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updated 2 hours, 54 minutes ago

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How some women never get sick

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking a cold shower may help boost your energy and reduce pain
- Some say ginger works wonders for certain gastrointestinal issues
- Garlic has antioxidants that boost immunity and fight inflammation
- Thinking positively may also help you fight off illness

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By Alicia Potter

Health

They survive cold season without a sniffle. They fly in germ-packed airplanes unscathed. And they somehow avoid stomach bugs that decimate the office. Wish you could be one of these women who never get sick? Try one or -- even better -- all of these seven secrets, and you may join this club come flu season.



Some say getting a massage once a month is key to fighting off bugs.

1. Get a massage

For the past three years, Mindy Hardwick, 38, of Lake Stevens, Washington, has dodged all the major bugs while volunteering at schools and a juvenile-detention center. Her secret weapon: a monthly massage. Hardwick even sailed through a move (selling her first house) without the post stress blahs. "It's got to be the massage," she says. "I'm convinced it's like taking medicine."

Most studies show that massage can reduce anxiety, blood pressure, and heart rate -- and lowering these is likely to cause your stress level to drop, one key to building immunity. [Health.com: What kind of massage is best for you?](#)

"Decreasing stress increases your immune cells," says Tiffany Field, PhD, director of the Touch

Research Institute of the University of Miami School of Medicine.

Make massage work for you: Any type of rubdown is fine, as long as you ask for moderate pressure, Field says. The therapist's touch should be vigorous enough to move or indent skin but not so hard that it causes pain. How often do you need one? There's no science on that, but experts say once a month (or more) is worthwhile. Check with your insurance provider to see if massage therapy is covered. If cost is an issue, check out massage schools, which sometimes offer discounted services.

You can take matters into your own hands, too, by showering with a stiff, natural-bristle brush; like moderate-pressure massage, this stimulates pressure receptors under the skin, Field says. A brush we like: Earth Therapeutics Far Reaching Back Brush (\$7; [www.mothernature.com](#)) And couples who massage each other for 10 minutes a few times a week can reap significant benefits, Field adds. Tune up your technique with Gaia's Massage Practice: Acupressure DVD (\$10; [www.gaiam.com](#)).

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she says. A year later, she says her chilly regimen keeps her cold-free, her skin glowing, and her energy level higher than ever. [Health.com: Boost your energy](#)

The scientific jury's still out on cold showers, but Mary Ann Bauman, MD, author of "Fight Fatigue: Six Simple Steps to Maximize Your Energy," says there's no harm in trying. Devotees claim cold showers help with low energy, migraines, circulation, and pain reduction, in addition to enabling women to age gracefully. (Some even argue that they're the French woman's secret to firm breasts.)

Make cold showers work for you: Try small doses. Witherspoon limits her 10-minute cold showers to summertime; in the winter, she opts for a 1-minute blast at the end of a warm shower.

Consult your doctor if you have cardiovascular problems, because the sudden chill can cause a spike in blood pressure.

3. Treat GI problems "gingerly"

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sipping a soothing home brew. When irregularity looms, she puts a few slices of peeled fresh ginger into a mug of hot water, steeps it for five minutes, and adds honey. "It tastes great and works like a charm," Berry says. She sees results in about three hours, sans the diarrhea many conventional laxatives cause.

For centuries, ginger has been the go-to root for a wide range of GI distresses. Researchers believe its compounds stimulate digestive secretions, improve intestinal muscle tone, and help move food through the gastrointestinal tract.

It's also safe to take ginger in small doses (less than 1,000 milligrams) for a short period of time during pregnancy, says Joyce Frye, a doctor of osteopathy and clinical assistant professor at the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland. Berry used it during both her pregnancies and had little morning sickness.

Make ginger work for you: Fresh ginger is sipped in tea or eaten straight-up is best, says Sari Greaves, RD, of New York Presbyterian Hospital--Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York City. But ginger in other forms (dried, powdered, cooked) can be effective, too. A tea to try: Yogi Lemon Ginger Tea and Traditional Medicinals' Organic Ginger Aid (\$4 to \$5; grocery stores). Ginger ale? Most brands have little or no real ginger and lots of high-fructose corn syrup.

4. Lather up (a lot)

Chris Pope Campbell, 39, of East Greenwich, Rhode Island, washes her hands up to a dozen times a day after using the restroom, upon returning home after work and errands, after blowing her nose, before eating. That's unusual. Surveys suggest less than half of us are so vigilant. Campbell's thrilled with the results: "I rarely get a cold, and there hasn't been a stomach flu in my family for more than five years."

While washing your hands that much may seem like a hassle, Campbell says it's become a comfortable habit. The only downside is that her hands get dry, so she has to moisturize frequently.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say hand-washing is the number-one action you can take to dodge the 1 billion colds Americans come down with annually, not to mention bacteria that cause foodborne illnesses such as E. coli and salmonella.

Make hand-washing work for you: Wash with regular soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds (the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice). Vigorously scrub all parts of your hands, not just palms, and check your fingernails for trapped dirt. Dry with paper towels, or designate a hand towel for each member of your household. (They can reuse these several times.) And don't forget to wash after gardening, working out, and handling raw meat or fish.

Also, keep alcohol wipes or alcohol-based cleaning gel handy when using ATM machines and grocery carts, taking public transportation, and reading magazines in waiting rooms, says Neil Schachter, MD, director of respiratory care at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York City. Alcohol kills bacteria and the viruses that cause colds. But don't use antibacterial and/or antimicrobial products: They have chemicals that can lead common bacteria to adapt and turn into superbugs. [Health.com: The lowdown on germ-killing wipes](#)

5. Try a cold-blasting cocktail

The überhealthy don't shrug off an impending cold -- they attack it. Jenny Spring, 29, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, takes a double shot of vitamin C and zinc at the first sign of ominous sniffles or throat tickles. She sips the powdered drink mix Emergen-C (it packs 1,000 mg of vitamin C) once or twice a day, followed by a few blasts of Zicam, an over-the-counter zinc nasal spray. "I've warded off coughs and colds long enough that I don't remember the last time I had one," she says.

Although vitamin C and zinc for cold prevention remain controversial, some studies show that C is especially helpful for people who are under extreme stress and that zinc can prevent viruses from multiplying. Experts say there's no harm in trying -- and just believing these remedies work may help, too.

Make C work for you: Schacter suggests a more conservative amount of vitamin C (500 mg a day) at the first sign of a cold. And the Institute of Medicine advises drawing the line at 2,000 mg daily to avoid gastrointestinal or kidney problems. As for zinc, it's available in many forms. Don't care for nose sprays? Schacter suggests taking zinc lozenges several times a day when a cold starts. [Health.com: Vitamin C: The ultimate anti-aging vitamin](#)

6. Eat more garlic

Susan Spain, 54, of Conyers, Georgia, hasn't been sick since 1992, and she credits that to one daily ritual: eating a clove of raw garlic right after breakfast. "I quarter it and put it in applesauce so it is easier to swallow and doesn't upset my stomach."

Spain is onto something. Garlic is rich in antioxidants that boost immunity and fight inflammation, says Carmia Borek, PhD, research professor in the department of public health and family medicine at Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston, Massachusetts. That means the herb, in addition to boosting defenses against everyday illness, probably helps to stave off cancer and boost heart health.

Make garlic work for you: If you're worried about bad breath and yucky burps, you're not alone. Those side effects aren't unusual, and experts warn that garlic can cause gas and acid reflux in some people. Still, up to two cloves a day is considered safe for most. Happily, there are options with fewer side effects. Aged-garlic extract is a great odor-free alternative, and it even has a higher concentration of the potent compounds that make garlic a superfood, Borek says. Try Kyolic Aged Garlic Extract Capsules (\$14; health-food stores). PS: Eating garlicky food can't hurt, but cooking depletes some of the pungent bulb's useful properties.

7. Stay positive

At the first sign of sickness, Jenny Spring, 29, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, practices another tactic linked to good health: "I tell myself that I refuse to be sick."

Is she crazy to think that works? Not at all. In one study, participants who had heightened activity in a region of the brain associated with a positive attitude produced greater amounts of flu antibodies. Another study showed that people with sunny dispositions churned out more antibodies in response to vaccinations.

Researchers aren't clear on the connection, but they do know "the brain communicates with the immune system, and vice versa," says Anna L. Marsland, PhD, director of the Behavioral Immunology Laboratory at the University of Pittsburgh. And a growing number of psychologists stress that focusing on wellness, as opposed to illness, can have good results.

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Make positive thinking work for you: If you don't always think positively, experts say, you can at least learn to be less negative. Don't dwell on your symptoms when you do get sick, and try not to assume the worst (like telling yourself, "I always get sick this time of year" or "This cold blows the whole week"). Practice focusing on your strengths and how you feel when you use them. Slowly, you'll recognize that these feelings are more rewarding than negative feelings.

"You probably can't change your personality," Marsland says, "but you can change your behavior." Odds are, you'll join the ranks of the perennially healthy. [E-mail to a friend](#) [Mixx it](#) [Share](#)

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