

Immune issues

Where is your immune system? Actually there's no one system that's actually the immune system; rather it consists of many defences: T and B cells in our blood, our stomach acid that destroys pathogens in our food, good gut flora which crowds out the bad bugs, our skin which is a waterproof barrier, and various mucus secretions that whisk nasties away when we sneeze or cough. There's lots more, but that will do for now.

So you can see that if you have an opening in your skin or a burn, problems with your blood, low stomach acid, or low resistance in general, you have a greater chance of getting sick. But even if you are healthy, some viruses will still win, as we need what are called "memory" cells (the B cells) which remember and start an immune response when they encounter invaders they've struck before. This is partly how vaccinations work. If there is no memory of a past disease, then our defences can be down without us knowing.

Viruses are extremely tiny structures, consisting of an outer protein structure called a capsid, which is made up of repeating protein units. The capsid contains nucleic acid, either DNA or RNA. Some viruses may have an additional outer layer called an envelope, which helps it to stick to the host cell. Viruses replicate inside our cells, using the host cell's DNA and enzymes to complete its requirements for multiplying. Once it's fully prepared (without us knowing), it kills off the host cells, spreads rapidly and there's that sore throat, headache and fever.

Viruses are clever little buggers – they mutate! This is how they outwit flu shots, and get from animal to animal to human. A disease which transmits from an animal to a human is called a zoonosis, and swine flu is an example.

An antiviral at your chemist is Tamiflu. However, there are lots of natural antivirals if you don't like taking drugs. A lot of herbs, such as thyme, sage (which can be made into herb teas), olive leaf, garlic, echinacea, eucalyptus, golden seal, peppermint, and marigold, have antimicrobial actions. However, it is important to have a practitioner prescribe these, as herbs (while natural) are not without contraindications, and you should tell your doctor if you're taking herbal medicine.

Vitamin C, zinc and lysine (an amino acid) are also important virus fighters. A practitioner supplement will give better therapeutic results than an over-the-counter brand, and it is best to have a consultation. There are lots of other healthy supplements which will increase your immunity to colds and flus, help you to recover more quickly, prevent side effects from drugs and boost your overall health. Don't hesitate to ask.

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[Advice in these columns is of a general nature only and is not to be taken as specific treatment.]