

Recovery mission

The average adult develops 1 to 3 colds every year. Here's what can help when the sniffles inevitably strike.

BY DENISE SCHIPANI

You wash your hands religiously and maintain a safe distance from coughing coworkers. Despite these defensive maneuvers, however, you've caught a nasty cold, complete with a sore throat, headache, congestion, and chills. Don't resign yourself to a week of misery just yet: Health experts say the most reliable remedies are cheap, quick, and widely available—meaning you barely have to leave bed to reap the benefits. Feel better fast with these six surefire soothers.

ZINC LOZENGES

If you've been sick for 24 hours or less, a few doses of oral zinc could speed your healing by several days, according to a 2010 analysis of 15 clinical trials. Zinc lozenges such as Cold-Eeze are generally fine to take several times a day for about a week, says Michael Benninger, M.D., chair of the Head and Neck Institute at the Cleveland Clinic; follow dosage instructions on the package. One caveat: Do not use zinc-based nasal sprays or ointments. These products can damage a person's sense of smell.

SALTWATER

You'd never want salt in your wounds, but when mixed with water, it's great for a sore throat. "Saltwater reduces swelling in the membranes of the throat, so the area hurts less," says Janet Engle, Pharm.D., head of the pharmacy practice department at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Stir ½ teaspoon of salt into a cup of warm water and gargle for several seconds, then spit. Repeat as needed—and keep it up to avoid getting sick again. In one study, people who gargled with saltwater every day caught far fewer colds than folks in a control group.

LEMON SLICES

Dryness makes a sore throat feel worse and can hinder healing, Benninger says. The most obvious way to keep the throat moist is to sip plenty of fluids. Another is to boost the body's saliva production—say, by flavoring your tea with a squeeze of tart lemon or sucking on a lollipop. Skip the medicated cough drops unless you like the taste. They offer no advantage over sweeter suckers.



STEAM

Mucus contains virus particles, so the more you expel, the more easily your immune system will win, says Lily Narusevicius, M.D., an internal medicine specialist at Hallmark Health Medical Associates in Reading, Massachusetts. To loosen congestion, drape a towel over the back of your head and position your face over a large bowl of steaming water for 5 minutes. Then clear your nasal passages by gently blowing into a tissue through one nostril at a time. (Blowing forcefully through both nostrils can send deep-seated mucus farther into sinuses.)

CHICKEN SOUP

This sick-day staple does more than soothe and nourish. A study in the journal *Chest* found that the combination of ingredients in classic chicken soup inhibits the movement of neutrophils, inflammatory white blood cells that travel through the respiratory tract and ramp up mucus production. Too sapped to fix a batch from scratch? Canned chicken soup works just as well.

BASIC PAIN RELIEVERS

Drugstores are filled with medicines marketed to cold sufferers, but in most cases, an ordinary pain reliever is sufficient, Benninger says. Your best bet is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug such as ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) or naproxen (Aleve), he says. This class of medicines soothes cold-induced muscle inflammation and can tamp down a fever to boot. If sickness has sapped your appetite, swallow the medicine with a few saltines or a dry piece of toast. Otherwise you could experience stomach upset. ■