



Here's Everything You Can Possibly Do to Avoid Getting the Flu

While there's no way to guarantee complete immunity, these practical tips could be your saving grace until spring.

1. Get. Your. Flu shot.

When you get a flu vaccination, your body releases antibodies that can protect you from the most common virus strains in any given season, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

2. Stay at least three feet away from anyone who's coughing or sneezing.

The flu virus is a parasite that hangs around in respiratory secretions that travel through the air in small droplets; when projected by a cough or sneeze, they can fly about three feet before gravity takes over, Dr. Adalja says. A flu patient who's actively projecting these droplets by coughing or sneezing can contaminate the air you breathe.

3. Keep your hands away from your face — and far from your mouth and nose.

Simply touching a contaminated surface won't give you the flu, since the virus doesn't infect the skin — it has to make it to a mucosal membrane in your mouth or nose to cause an infection. But you risk getting sick when you touch an infected surface and transfer the virus to your face.

4. Clean communal surfaces at least once a day.

The flu virus can remain viable without a host for about 24 hours, according to Dr. Adalja. "In general, all household surfaces are going to be contaminated with the flu virus if you're living with someone who has the flu," he says, adding that about 25 percent of people who become infected experience no symptoms but can still be contagious. It's why you should wipe down commonly-touched surfaces — think phone chargers, fridge handles, and light switches — at least once a day using any standard household cleaner, regardless of whether anyone in your household is sick.

5. Wash your hands after touching any communal surfaces.

Touch a light switch? Communal keyboard? Water cooler? Whether you're in a public place or in your home, it's smart to wash your hands after handling any commonly-touched surfaces using soap and water afterward. Lather up for at least 20 seconds, then rinse under water, and air dry or pat dry with a clean towel, as per the CDC's best practices. In the absence of a sink, a hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol is your next best bet.

6. Wear surgical gloves when caring for someone who's sick.

In clinical environments, doctors and nurses wear disposable surgical gloves and masks to avoid contact with contaminated secretions and surfaces. If you're not prepared to suit up at home, frequent hand-washing is your next best bet when you're around anyone with the flu.

7. Encourage others to trash their own tissues.

This way, you can avoid direct contact with a sick person's respiratory secretions, which can carry the flu virus, according to Dr. Adalja.

8. No hugging or kissing!

The flu virus is contagious beginning the day before you experience your first symptom, any time a fever is present, and up to a week after the last symptom subsides. So it's no surprise that kissing and hugging a flu carrier is risky during this time.

9. Don't share a bed with someone who has the flu.

Like other communal surfaces, blankets and pillows, particularly in shared beds, can host the flu virus for about 24 hours. Although it's best to avoid sharing a bed with an infected person — particularly when he or she is coughing or sneezing — you can avoid infection by keeping to yourself once in bed, and changing the linens if your partner steals your pillow.

10. Keep the windows closed.

Although cracking a window next to your sneezing office neighbor might give you peace of mind — since theoretically, it would help circulate out infected air — chances are it won't do much to protect you. "Unless someone literally sticks their head out the window or moves out to the fire escape, opening the window won't have any measurable benefits once the flu virus is in the air,"

11. Store your toothbrush out of sight.

Otherwise, a communal toothbrush holder contaminated by an infected person's toothbrush could transfer germs to your toothbrush, or an infected roommate's rogue sneeze can contaminate your bristles with the flu virus, which can be transferred to your mouth, Dr. Adalja says.

12. Avoid sharing food with infected people.

Although food doesn't play a major role in spreading influenza, eating contaminated food — i.e., by sharing a plate or eating utensils with someone who's infected — can potentially make you ill, according to Dr. Adalja.

13. Do your own dishes.

"It's very difficult to completely avoid flu exposure when you're living in the same household as someone who is infected," Dr. Adalja says. But taking on extra chores, like emptying the dishwasher, can keep an infected roommate from planting his or her virus on utensils and glasses that end up in your mouth.

14. Get sufficient sleep.

"Having adequate sleep is a good habit for optimal immune system functioning and to prevent respiratory viruses like the flu," Dr. Adalja says. The average adult should clock between 7 and 9 hours of sleep per night, according to the National Sleep Foundation.

15. Don't bother taking Cold-Eeze, immunity-boosting supplements, or prophylactic Tamiflu.

Dr. Adalja says the zinc in cold-shortening candy like Cold-Eeze is only clinically proven to shorten the length of a cold, not the flu. In terms of supplements, the average American diet already provides sufficient nutrients to support healthy immune system functioning, so consuming more won't help. And while Tamiflu, the anti-viral drug prescribed to flu patients within the first 48 hours of sickness to expedite recovery and make the virus less contagious, is sometimes prescribed in small doses prevent the flu, it can ultimately make you resistant so it doesn't work as well the next time you really need it.

16. R-E-L-A-X.

Yes, the flu can make you sick, but guess what? Stress can, too: People who report psychological stress are less likely to develop protective antibodies in response to the flu vaccine, according to a 2009 review of 13 existing studies, which was published in *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*. "It's important not to become completely obsessed and compulsive," Dr. Adalja says. "During a flu season like this, when the virus is spreading among humans in every type of environment and community, you're going to be exposed to it — even if you live in an overly sterile environment."

~The Bottom Line~

"Even the perfect environment won't be a sterile bomb shelter against flu," says Dr. Adalja, who suggests seeing a doctor if you develop any flu symptoms and are considered at high risk for complications, or severe flu symptoms such as an unrelenting fever or shortness of breath. "The biggest thing is to get the flu vaccine," he says. "Everything else is extra."

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