

Natural Cold and Flu Remedies



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It's no wonder natural cold and flu remedies are popular -- modern medicine has yet to offer a cure for these age-old ailments. While some medications can prevent and shorten the flu's duration, some medications only offer temporary relief of symptoms. Many natural remedies provide temporary relief as well, and a few may actually help you get better. See which cold and flu remedies show the most promise.



Echinacea

Echinacea is an herbal supplement that is believed to boost the immune system to help fight infections. But it's unclear whether this boost helps fight off colds. Most evidence shows echinacea doesn't help prevent a cold, but some research shows it decreases symptoms by a day or two. Others show it has no effect. To try it, take echinacea when symptoms start and continue for 7 to 10 days. If you have a medical condition or take medication, check with your doctor before taking any supplement.



Zinc

Some studies show that zinc appears to have effects against viruses, like the cold. There is some evidence the mineral may prevent the formation of certain proteins that cold viruses use to reproduce themselves. While zinc does not appear to help prevent colds, some research suggests it may help shorten cold symptom duration and reduce the severity of the common cold when taken within 24 hours of the first symptoms. The FDA recommends against using zinc nasal products for colds because of reports of permanent loss of smell.



Vitamin C

The cold-fighting prowess of vitamin C remains uncertain. Some studies suggest it can help reduce the duration of cold symptoms by about a day. In one study, participants who were exposed to extreme physical stress and cold weather and who took vitamin C were 50% less likely to get a cold. To help stem a cold, 2,000 milligrams seems to work best, but this high dose may cause diarrhea and stomach upset.



Chicken Soup

Grandma was onto something. Chicken soup may help cold symptoms in more than one way. Inhaling the steam can ease nasal congestion. Sipping spoonfuls of fluid can help avoid dehydration. And some advocates say the soup may soothe inflammation. Researchers have found chicken soup has anti-inflammatory properties in the lab, though it's unclear whether this effect translates to real-world colds.



Hot Tea

Drinking hot tea offers some of the same benefits as chicken soup. Inhaling the steam relieves congestion, while swallowing the fluid soothes the throat and keeps you hydrated. Black and green teas have the added bonus of being loaded with disease-fighting antioxidants, which may fight colds.



Hot Toddy

The hot toddy is an age-old nighttime cold remedy. Since you won't want to drink black tea before bed, make a cup of hot herbal tea. Add a teaspoon of honey, a small shot of whiskey or bourbon, and a squeeze of lemon. This mixture may ease congestion, soothe the throat and help you sleep. Limit yourself to one hot toddy. Too much alcohol can disrupt sleep.



Garlic

Garlic has long been touted for legendary germ-fighting abilities. One study showed garlic supplements may help prevent colds when taken daily. However, more research is needed to determine garlic's real effects. But garlic is very nutritious. In addition, it can help spice up your meals when a stuffy nose makes everything taste bland.



Steam/Humidifier

For a heavy dose of steam, use a room humidifier -- or simply sit in the bathroom with the door shut and a hot shower running. Breathing in steam can break up congestion in the nasal passages, offering relief from a stuffy or runny nose.



Saline Drops

Dripping or spraying saltwater into the nose can thin out nasal secretions and help remove excess mucus, while reducing congestion. Try over-the-counter saline drops, or make your own by mixing 8 ounces of warm water with 1/4 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon baking soda. Use a bulb syringe to squirt the mixture into one nostril while holding the other one closed. Repeat 2-3 times and then do the other side.



Neti Pot

You can use the same DIY saline solution in a neti pot. This small ceramic pot is used to flush out the nasal passages with a saltwater solution -- a process known as nasal irrigation. The result is thinner mucus that drains more easily. Research suggests neti pots are useful in relieving sinus symptoms, such as congestion, pressure, and facial pain, particularly in patients with chronic sinus troubles.



Menthol Ointment

Days of wiping and blowing your nose can leave the skin around your nostrils sore and irritated. A simple remedy is to dab a menthol-infused ointment under, but not in, the nose or on the chest or throat. Menthol has mild numbing agents that can relieve the pain of raw skin. As an added benefit, breathing in the medicated vapors that contain menthol or camphor may help relieve cough or open clogged passages and ease symptoms of congestion. *Use only in children over 2 years of age.*



Saltwater Gargle

For a sore throat, the traditional saltwater gargle may have some merit. Gargling warm water with a teaspoon of salt four times daily may help keep a scratchy throat moist.



Nasal Strips

Another strategy for relieving nighttime congestion is to try over-the-counter nasal strips. These are strips of tape worn on the bridge of the nose to open the nasal passages. While they can't unclog the nose, they do create more space for airflow.



Let Your Fever Work

A fever is the original natural remedy. The rise in temperature actively fights colds and flu by making your body inhospitable for germs. However, if your fever is making you uncomfortable, it's fine to take something to reduce it. And be sure to stay well hydrated. Call your doctor right away if the fever is over 104, unless it comes down quickly with treatment. In infants 3 months or younger call your doctor for any fever greater than 100.4. Children with a fever of less than 102 usually don't require treatment unless they're uncomfortable.



Bed Rest

With our busy lives, most of us loathe to spend a day or two under the covers. But getting plenty of rest lets your body direct more energy to fighting off germs. Staying warm is also important, so tuck yourself in and give your immune cells a leg up in their noble battle.

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