



## Fight the flu with a good night's rest

Sleep is the body's elixir—and the best way of all for avoiding this nasty seasonal bug.

BY DR. JULIE T. CHEN

I'm worried about getting the flu and colds this winter. How can I help protect myself?

**D**URING the winter months, many of the patients at my integrative medicine clinic ask for an all-natural way to fight off illness. While we all know that loading up on Vitamin C and washing hands consistently are effective ways of warding off viruses, a lesser-known immune booster is sleep. Getting an adequate amount of sleep every night is one of the easiest ways to aid your body's natural defense against the flu, making for a healthier—and more well-rested—you.

One of the best things you can do for your mind and body this winter is to give yourself plenty of opportunities to nap and sleep in! Studies have shown that even an extra hour of sleep per night can significantly decrease your chances of catching the flu: People who get less than six hours of sleep per night are four and a half times more likely to get sick than those who clock in at seven or more hours.

Lack of sleep makes your body more susceptible to viruses and bacteria because it weakens your immune system while also raising your risk of inflammation. This makes it much harder for your body to combat germs in your environment, increasing your chances of getting the flu. Sleep is the body's way of restoring itself, repairing heart and blood vessels, and stabilizing chemicals in your brain. Sleep plays a huge role in maintaining healthy brain function

and emotional wellbeing.

Besides sleep, be sure to get plenty of exercise and consume a diet full of fresh fruits and vegetables, complex carbohydrates and lean proteins. Drinking lots of water is another way to naturally flush out toxins. Water is crucial because it's required for bodily function, but it also keeps mucous membranes like your eyes and nose moist, making for a more effective defense against airborne bacteria.

If you're one of the many who have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep for more than six hours, it is necessary to practice healthy sleep habits nightly. Set a goal for yourself to go to bed earlier than you normally do, starting with an interval as small as 15 minutes. As you grow more accustomed to getting to bed earlier, increase that interval to 30 minutes or one hour.

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Put away electronics like your smartphone or computer at least an hour before bedtime, as these devices stimulate the brain. Meditation is another method for relaxing the mind and body before bed. If you've never meditated before, simply practice taking ten deep, slow breaths in bed before you fall asleep. Meditation is proven to calm the body and mind and helps get your body ready to fall asleep.

Most importantly, listen to your body. If you're yawning midday or feel sleepy on a Sunday afternoon, allow yourself the time to take a quick nap or enjoy other leisurely activities. Not only will you feel more rested and energized throughout the day for work or school, but you'll also be putting the flu to bed, one nap at a time. **Z**

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