

This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Listen to the full episode here: <https://bbc.in/41gR7qv>

Georgie

Hello, this is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Georgie.

Neil

And I'm Neil. In this programme we're talking about the immune system, which is the body's natural defence against getting ill. Now, Georgie, is there anything you do to boost your immune system?

Georgie

Yes. I try to eat lots of oranges, which apparently have lots of vitamin C, and there are lots of things people do to try to improve their immune system, and stay healthier, like eating certain foods, taking vitamins, or even activities like swimming in cold water. We'll find out how useful some of these techniques are in today's programme.

Neil

But first, Georgie, a question. We all know the common cold – now, that's the illness that makes you cough and sneeze, have a sore throat and headache. But how many colds does the average adult get in the UK each year? Is it:

- a) 2-3?
- b) 4-5? Or
- c) 7-8?

Georgie

Eight would be a lot. I'm going to go with a) 2-3 colds a year.

Neil

Well, we'll find out at the end of the programme if you're right. Now, many people can become ill over the winter with diseases like colds, flu and Covid-19. Host of

BBC Radio 4 programme Inside Health, James Gallagher, gathered some experts to talk about immune systems, and he started off by asking whether they'd had more illnesses than usual this winter.

James Gallagher

Hello! [Hi.] Right, how has everyone been this winter? Because I've had a rotten one and I have felt constantly ill since about November. John?

John Tregoning

I have not had anything yet, **touch wood**.

James Gallagher

OK, let's see what I can infect you with by the end of the show. Margaret?

Margaret McCartney

I was pretty unwell in September. I had what I presume to be Covid. But I've been alright since, mild **snuffles** aside.

James Gallagher

Eleanor, I really need someone to **back me up**.

Eleanor Riley

No, sorry, I've been absolutely 100% **tickety-boo**.

Georgie

Unlike James, Professor John Tregoning hasn't been ill. John uses the expression **touch wood**, which is an informal phrase said in order to avoid bad luck.

Neil

Doctor Margaret McCartney was unwell in September but has only had a few **snuffles** since. **Snuffles** is an informal word used to describe minor illnesses that affect your nose. We can also say **sniffles**.

Georgie

Host James is surprised that nobody has been ill, and says to Professor Eleanor Riley '**back me up**'. If you ask someone to **back you up**, you are asking for them to say something which supports your opinion.

Neil

But Eleanor has had a healthy winter too. She's been **tickety-boo**, which is an informal phrase meaning everything's fine or in good order.

Georgie

Throughout the winter, many people try different techniques, like taking supplements or eating certain foods to boost their immune system, to improve their body's natural defences against disease. Host of BBC Radio 4's Inside Health, James Gallagher asks doctor Margaret McCartney whether some of these products are successful.

James Gallagher

OK quick-fire round Margaret. Echinacea?

Margaret McCartney

No.

James Gallagher

Turmeric?

Margaret McCartney

No.

James Gallagher

Ginger shots?

Margaret McCartney

No.

James Gallagher

This is a very, very good quiz! What about the stuff you squirt up your nose when you're at the beginning of an infection?

Margaret McCartney

Interesting, but not any better than normal saline spray – just salt water.

Neil

In fact, according to Margaret, there isn't enough evidence that many popular health products can actually change the way your immune system works.

Georgie

Another popular health trend in the UK is cold water swimming. People who swim in cold water say it's good for their mental health, and they also believe it makes them less likely to get ill during the winter months.

Neil

But scientists aren't sure about the benefits of cold water swimming for the immune system yet, as Professor John Tregoning explains to BBC Radio 4's Inside Health.

John Tregoning

The social element actually is really important. It probably is beneficial to do. You reduce stress and cortisol **dampens** the immune system, so actually if you're stressed then maybe you are more **prone to** infection. And that may be why that benefit of being with people, nice people that you like in nice places, is helping. But I don't think it's unique to cold water swimming. I think you could probably get it from dancing or singing or going for a run.

Georgie

John says that cortisol, a chemical associated with stress, **dampens** the immune system. Here, **dampens** means makes weaker. We also have a common expression '**dampen someone's spirits**' which means to make them less enthusiastic about something.

Neil

John says that there is evidence that people who are stressed are more **prone to** infection. If you're more **prone to** something, it's more likely to happen to you.

Georgie

It could be that cold water swimming reduces stress, and so it helps people's immune systems work well. But there are lots of other activities that could have the same effect, and help people have fewer colds over winter.

Neil

Which reminds me of my question, Georgie. I asked how many colds the average UK adult has a year.

Georgie

And I said 2-3.

Neil

And that is the correct answer, so well done!

Georgie

Thank you! OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned, starting with **touch wood**, which is an expression used, often in speech, to avoid bad luck.

Neil

Snuffles, or **sniffles**, are minor illnesses that affect your nose.

Georgie

If you ask someone to **back you up**, you want them to say something to support your opinion.

Neil

The expression **tickety-boo** means fine and in good order.

Georgie

If you **dampen** something you make it weaker. And the expression **dampen someone's spirits** means you make them less enthusiastic about something.

Neil

And if you're more **prone to** something, it's more likely to happen to you.

Georgie

Once again our 6 minutes are up, but you can test what you've learned with the free interactive quiz on our website.

Neil

Bye for now!

Georgie

Goodbye!

Beth

Thanks for listening to this podcast from BBC Learning English. Continue your learning on our website with courses, quizzes and programmes to improve your English. Visit [bbclearningenglish.com](https://www.bbclearningenglish.com).

VOCABULARY

touch wood

an expression used in spoken English in order to avoid bad luck

snuffles/sniffles

minor illnesses that affect your nose

back me up

an expression used in conversation to ask someone to say something to support your opinion

tickety-boo

fine and in good order

dampen (something)

make something weaker

prone to (something)

likely to be negatively affected by something