

9 natural cold and flu remedies

Do natural cold and flu remedies really work?

Barbara Austin, RN, MN, a nurse and complex case manager at Piedmont Sixty Plus, separates fact from fiction.

The best natural cold and flu remedies

Hydration

Austin's number one recommendation for recovering quickly from a cold or flu virus is staying hydrated.

"When you're hydrated, your body has a natural ability to flush germs out of your system," she says. She recommends 64 ounces of fluid a day, but talk to your doctor about your specific needs. Some people, such as those with congestive heart failure, should drink less water.

Vitamin C

While vitamin C hasn't been proven to prevent cold symptoms, some studies have indicated it can shorten the lifespan of a cold. Plus, it boosts your overall health, including your immune system.

Austin recommends getting the vitamin through your diet. The fresher the food, the better. Think of

oranges rather than orange juice or supplements. Overdoing it on vitamin C supplements (not dietary vitamin C) can lead to upset stomach and kidney stones.

Sleep

"It's so important to get plenty of rest during cold and flu season," Austin says.

Sleep helps your immune system function at its best to ward off nasty viruses and bacteria.

Honey and tea

"I'm a honey fanatic," she says. "It has natural antiviral and antimicrobial properties."

Add the natural sweetener (opt for a local variety when possible) to a cup of ginger or cinnamon tea to relieve a scratchy throat and stay hydrated.

Chicken soup

Sometimes, Mom really does know best! Hot liquids, such as soup, help reduce mucus buildup and keep you hydrated. A study by the University of Nebraska Medical Center found chicken soup has anti-inflammatory properties, which help reduce a cold's unpleasant side effects.

Aromatherapy

Rub camphor or menthol salve around – not in! – your nose to break up mucus. You can also reduce congestion by breathing in aromatherapy oils, such as peppermint and eucalyptus.

A steamy shower

Austin says a steamy shower or sauna is a great decongestant. One caveat: If you are dizzy or weak from the flu, sit in a chair in your bathroom while you run a hot shower.

Gargling warm salt water

Dissolve 1/2 teaspoon of salt in a cup of warm water, then gargle to relieve a sore throat.

Sleep with an extra pillow

To help your sinuses drain, sleep with an extra pillow under your head.

Natural cold remedies to use with caution

Nasal irrigation

"Nasal irrigation can be helpful in irrigating and hydrating nasal passages so they aren't dry and cracked, which can break the skin's protective

barrier against viruses and bacteria," she says.

"However, it's important to do it safely. Talk to your doctor before starting nasal irrigation therapy."

Never use tap water for nasal irrigation.

Contaminated tap water for sinus rinsing has been linked to a rare but potentially deadly brain infection. Instead, use boiled and cooled tap water, sterile or distilled water, or saline solution.

Herbal supplements and vitamins

Some people swear by echinacea or zinc supplements, but research on their benefits is inconclusive.

"If you're considering any alternative medicine, talk to your healthcare provider," Austin says. "Vitamins and supplements are not FDA-approved and there often isn't good research on their effectiveness. For a lot of people, it's trial and error to find what works best."