Steps To “Flu-Proof” Your Body

By Dr. Ramona Warren

The holiday season is now upon us, and that means so is the beginning of flu season. Flu season runs from October through May, with the worst flu activity typically occurring between December and February. Each year, there are over 30 million cases of flu in the United States, with 200,000 people being hospitalized from flu-related symptoms and approximately 36,000 deaths each year. The greatest percentage of deaths and hospitalizations occur in those older than 65.

Many people feel that simply getting a flu vaccine is going to protect them from getting sick. However, it’s important to note that flu vaccines are not 100 percent effective in preventing the flu, and the vaccine’s effectiveness varies annually. The CDC estimates the flu shot for 2014-2015 was only effective in 19 percent of cases -- that is less than 1 out of 5 cases! In 2010-2011 vaccine effectiveness was closer to 60 percent. The worst year was 2004-2005, where the vaccine was only effective in 10 percent of cases. For those over 65, the odds of getting the flu after having a flu shot get even worse. According to the CDC, in 2013 flu vaccine effectiveness for those over 65 was only 9 percent.

There are also side effects to consider when getting a flu vaccine. Some side effects can be quite serious, especially for the elderly. Whether or not you get a flu shot is a personal decision that only you can make. Avoiding the flu is more about maintaining a healthy immune system. There are many things we can do to improve our immunity and decrease our risk for contracting the flu.

Here are some important steps you can take to help protect yourself from the flu virus, as well as other viruses, whether you choose to get vaccinated or not.

1. **Drink plenty of water.** Water is our most important nutrient. It helps keep mucus membranes moist, which helps improve the barrier against viruses and other infections. Drinking hot water with lemon with a little honey and cinnamon can help keep you hydrated and reduce mucus production.
2. **Keep your digestive system healthy.** Having beneficial bacteria in our gut is one of the most important steps in optimizing our immune system. Eating fermented foods, such as sauerkraut, kimchi, kombucha, and apple cider vinegar, and taking a quality probiotic will help build good gut flora.
3. **Watch your sweet tooth.** Sugar suppresses your immune system almost immediately. It destroys the good bacteria in your gut and feeds bad bacteria, yeast and viruses. But, deprivation isn’t necessary. Opt for sweets that use natural sweeteners and try some of the healthy dessert recipes you can find at [www.pathwaystohealing.biz](http://www.pathwaystohealing.biz).
4. **Maintain good vitamin D levels.** Vitamin D is an important immunity booster. Many people, especially those over the age of 65, are deficient. In the winter months we get less vitamin D since the main source of vitamin D is sunshine. Researchers have recommend a dose of 2,000 to 4,000 IU per day if you are not in the sun at least three days a week. Be sure to have a doctor check your vitamin D levels before supplementing. The optimal level you want to maintain is 50-70 ng/ml. Be careful not to overdo the dosage, since vitamin D is a fat soluble vitamin and too much can be harmful.
5. **Make sure you are getting enough zinc.** Zinc is another nutrient that is important in helping the immune system and has an antiviral effect.
6. **Natural flu remedies.** Besides vitamin D and zinc, herbs such as echinacea, adrographis, and elderberry can help fight infections and de-activate the flu virus. Vitamin C also helps boost the immune system. Other natural immunity boosters include oregano oil, clove oil, peppermint oil and frankincense oil.
7. **Get plenty of sleep.** Sleep helps boost your immune system. We should aim for at least eight hours a night. If your body is tired, it will be harder for it to fight off a virus.
8. **Limit contact.** Wash your hands, cover coughs and sneezes, and stay home when you are sick. Cold and flu viruses spread easily through contact. However, just because you are exposed does not mean you have to become sick. Studies show those who keep their immune system healthy are at much lower risk of getting ill when they come in contact with the virus, even if they have not had the vaccine and don’t have antibodies against a specific virus.
9. **Exercise.** Exercise is beneficial for your immune system. According to the *Harvard Health Publication* from Harvard Medical School, exercise helps the immune system by “promoting circulation, which allows the cells and substances of the immune system to move through the body freely and do their job efficiently.”
10. **Stress management.** We all experience stress, and some stress can actually be beneficial. However, when we become overwhelmed, it can cause us to become anxious, effect our sleep, increase blood pressure, cause us to choose poor quality foods and many other poor habits that can weaken the immune system and our ability to fight the flu. Utilizing good stress management techniques such as deep breathing, prayer, meditation, exercise, yoga and positive visualization are simple steps that can go a long way in helping boost immune response.