

Exercise more, get sick less!

By Jenn Gill, MPH

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This December has been the harbinger of many things: cold days, holiday stress, and cold and flu season, to name a few. While we can't control the weather or the influx of holiday hoopla, we do have some control over whether or not we get sick. What if there was a way to decrease our chances of getting sick this winter? In addition to the usual methods like washing your hands often and getting a flu shot, recent research suggests that keeping up with your regular exercise routine can dramatically reduce the likelihood of getting sick.

There are countless research studies out there that have highlighted the benefits of regular exercise. A recent study published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* can be added to that list. Researchers from Appalachian State University, headed by exercise immunologist Dr. David Nieman (a longtime marathon and ultramarathon runner), found that regular exercisers significantly reduced their chances of getting sick, compared to those that only exercised once a week. About 1,000 volunteers between age 18 and 85 were recruited to complete a daily log of cold and flu symptoms, in addition to their aerobic activity and perceived fitness level. Over the course of the 12-week study (which was conducted during cold and flu season), it was evident that the regular exercisers (those logging 5 days or more per week of at least 20 minutes of aerobic activity) were less likely to get sick. In fact, those regular exercisers experienced 43% fewer days of illness compared with those exercising only one day per week.

In addition to staying active, getting enough sleep can also help you avoid calling in sick this winter. Research published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* examined a group of 150 healthy men and women between the ages of 21 and 55 for a 2-week period. The group recorded their sleep duration and "efficiency" (how well they slept and how rested they felt) for 2 weeks. After the 2 weeks, the group was quarantined and researchers actually infected them with the cold virus and examined the group for 5 days to see if they did indeed get sick. Researchers found that individuals that slept less than 7 hours per night were almost 3 times more likely to get sick than those that slept at least 8 hours. In addition, those that didn't "sleep well" each night were 5 and a half times more likely to get sick than those that slept well each night.

What does all of this mean? It means we should try to make the time for ourselves to be active and get the sleep we need this winter. It all looks so good on paper, but in the real world, is it possible? I say, YES! Taking 20 minutes to exercise each day (which can be broken up into 2 10-minute segments if necessary) and then going to sleep maybe 20-30 minutes earlier each night may be easier than losing a week or more to a nasty cold. I know the to-do list is a mile long, especially during the holidays. You can tackle some of those items by combining them with exercise. Run to the post office to mail those holiday cards. Park further away from the mall and walk briskly to the entrance. Once inside, take an extra lap or two around the mall when you're done shopping. Walk the airport while you're waiting for that holiday flight. There are so many ways you can incorporate your exercise into your regular everyday life. The important thing is to recognize that a little goes a long way. And if we don't take care of ourselves in these relatively small ways, we can't take care of all the things on that to-do list. Besides, an active, well-rested you may be the key to enjoying a less stressful, less sick winter!

Happy Running!

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