

COLD AND FLU SEASON OR BAD DIET AND STRESS SEASON?

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Cold and flu season is upon us again and Covid infections are supposed to increase this winter as well. It's also the holiday season! What a terrible coincidence...Or is it?

What if we didn't have a cold and flu season but had a season of too much time indoors, too much sugar in our diets, not enough exercise, weight gain and high stress?



Sure, our immune systems can be shocked by quick changes in weather and temperature but if you've lived in the same climate for a couple of years, your body should acclimate to the range of temperature changes in your area quite readily.

With that, our immune systems should be strong and robust enough to handle the changes in weather unless you are immune compromised or over stressed and eating poorly. If you fall into the latter groups, there are still things you can do to try to avoid being a statistic of the cold and flu season.

Just as the weather is getting colder in the northern hemisphere, we have Halloween candy and pumpkin spiced lattes...followed by pumpkin pies, Thanksgiving stuffing and white potatoes...followed by eggnog, cakes, cookies, candies and alcohol...followed by more alcohol and an evening of overindulgence...then right into another holiday celebrated by boxes of chocolates and hearts made of nothing but sugar and food coloring.

I'm sure you're following me but let me make things even clearer:

October - Just as the weather is turning colder, driving many folks inside for the next 5-6 months and decreasing activity levels - we have Halloween and all of the junk food associated with that including those "pumpkin spiced" everything which are generally full of sugar and artificial flavors and sweeteners.

November - The cold is really setting in, we are starting to prepare for the holiday season and people's stress levels tend to skyrise during the next two months. Add to that more "pumpkin spiced" things and the meal associated with the US holiday of this month which includes food full of carbohydrates and sugar - like white potatoes, stuffing, pies, alcohol, etc. Additionally, this is a great time to gather with family and friends but not everybody has that support network and it can exacerbate loneliness and depression.

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December - There are different holidays this month but stress and food are a main underlying factor for most of them. The main holiday in the US this month is again full of candy, cakes, cookies, bad food, alcohol and HIGH STRESS.

January - Look, another holiday with bad food and alcohol! NYE is technically in December but carries over into January. Additionally, about 25% of people make a resolution each year at this time but typically only 12% of those people (or 3% of all people) are successful with their resolutions on a long-term basis. What do you think the most common resolution is? You guessed it...losing weight/getting healthier! Do you think the 88% of people who fail at their resolution, especially the most common one, might increase stress? You BET!

February - Yet another holiday with a focus on candy. Boxes of chocolates, sugar candies with artificial food coloring, alcohol, etc.

When **March** comes along, most people have had MONTHS of poor eating, poor habits, extended time spent inside, little exercise or activity, etc. BUT, the weather is often getting warmer and people can often get back outside now. Additionally, this is around the end of “cold and flu season” and “coincidentally”, this is the end of all of the “bad habit” and self-sabotaging holidays.

So, again is it a cold and flu season...or is it not enough sunlight, too much sugar, too much stress, too much alcohol and weight gain which leads to a suppressed immune system and subsequently, makes people more susceptible to infections including colds, flus and Covid...?

Knowing all of this, how do we combat all of these things over the next few months?

1. **Get outside!** Yes, even when it's cold out, just trying to get out for 10-15 minutes per day can make a big difference.
2. **PUT DOWN THE COOKIE!** I'm not saying you can't have a treat here or there but if you stop making the treats yourself around the holidays, there will be less temptation at home. Next, focus more on fresh fruits, fresh vegetables and good proteins. Then, make sure you have a plan for those parties where you know there will be treats and other bad foods. If you are asked to bring a dish to share to a gathering, make sure you bring something healthy so you know you will have at least one good thing to eat (since you made it and brought it!). Also, spikes in blood glucose can have detrimental effects on immune function.
3. **Activity levels.** Make sure you are getting enough activity each day - even if just 20 minutes. If you are starting from no activity, try starting with just 3 minutes of activity per day. Seriously, just 3 minutes! Each week, aim to add another 1-2 minutes of activity per session and pretty soon you will be up to 20 minutes without hardly noticing the increases. Try to find something you enjoy and it'll feel less like a chore!
4. **Sleep.** Get enough sleep and make sure you feel rested in the morning. Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every night - yes, even on weekends. If you are not getting at least 7-9 hours of sleep per night (don't laugh, that's the recommended amount) and don't feel rested when you get up in the morning, start making some changes.

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5. **Vitamins D.** Vitamin D and other targeted vitamins can help our body with stress and weather changes as well. If you haven't had your vitamin D levels checked, let us know. Fewer and fewer insurance companies are covering this test any more and fewer and fewer primary care providers will even order the test - but I don't play by those rules! We know the positive effects of vitamin D and even more so, the detrimental effects of low vitamin D levels.

There is definitely an increase in cold and flu infections during November through March but there **are** things we can do to try to reduce our risk of getting sick. Implement as many of these tips as you can and be well, friends!

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