

Your Family Flu-Prevention Plan

Top medical experts weigh in with the 10 best ways to boost your family's immune systems and fend off H1N1 and other nasty viruses.



Many experts, and most moms, are bracing for a more-difficult-than-usual cold and flu season this winter, thanks to swine flu, or the H1N1 virus. As of early October, visits to doctors for influenza-like illnesses were increasing at a rate that is "very unusual for this time of year," according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—and 76 pediatric deaths attributed to H1N1 had been reported.

Despite all the scary news coverage, though, there's no reason to panic. There are simple steps you can take to protect your family. While no one can predict how widespread or severe swine flu may become, it's important to follow these preventive measures. After all, they can help you fight regular flu and colds, too. We asked experts for the latest news on what you can do to strengthen your immune system, limit your exposure to germs and stay healthy.



There's a good reason why washing your hands is at the top of our list: It's one of the easiest and best ways to prevent colds and flu. In one study Navy recruits who scrubbed up five times a day had 45 percent fewer respiratory ailments than recruits who didn't. How best to rinse those germs away? Use warm water and regular bar or liquid soap (not antibiotic formulas, which may make bacteria more resistant to antibiotics). Rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds, the time it takes to sing your ABCs. And be thorough: Clean under your nails, the backs of your hands and between your fingers. Rinse and dry with a clean cloth or paper towel; then, if you're in a public place, use the towel to turn off the faucet and open the door as you exit. Make sure your kids wash their hands throughout the day, too.

Carry hand sanitizer containing at least 65 percent alcohol for times when soap and water aren't available. A pea-size dollop will destroy many (but not all) germs instantly and is better than nothing, says Birgit Winther, M.D., associate professor at the University of Virginia's department of otolaryngology.

2. Go For a Flu Shot—or Two

Although a vaccination doesn't protect against every variation or new mutation of flu virus that comes along each season, getting immunized is still the smart choice for most people. Flu vaccinations can't guarantee that you and your family won't get sick, but they offer the best protection right now, says Shmuel Shoham, M.D., scientific director for the MedStar Clinical Research Center at Washington Hospital Center, in Washington, D.C.

This year, in addition to the regular flu vaccine, one for swine flu has also been developed by manufacturers. Your family may need both. The CDC strongly recommends the regular flu vaccine for children 6 months to 19 years old, pregnant women, infant caregivers, adults 50 and older, health-care workers and those with certain chronic medical conditions.

The swine flu vaccine is recommended for pregnant women, caregivers of infants, kids 6 months to 24 years old, people under 65 with existing medical conditions and health-care workers. (As alternatives to shots, ask your doctor about the availability of nasal-spray vaccines for both types of flu.)

3. Keep All Surfaces Clean

If you had special goggles that would let you see how many cold and flu germs lurk around you, you might be tempted to wear surgical gloves all the time. Dr. Winther led a team of scientists that tested surfaces in the homes of people with colds. They found that viral germs on refrigerator door handles, light switches, phones, TV remotes and elsewhere survived for two days or longer. In fact, if someone at home has a cold, commonly touched areas like door handles test positive for the cold virus 40 percent of the time. So if you, your spouse or your children are sick, frequently wipe down the things you all touch. No need to use heavy cleaning agents, says Dr. Winther—plain old dishwashing detergent and water will do the trick. And remind whoever is sick to sneeze into his or her elbow, not the hand, to further limit the easy transfer of germs.