

staying well in winter

Many seniors are especially susceptible to colds, flus and other viruses during the winter months, particularly those with weakened immunity due to chronic conditions. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to safely navigate through the winter, keeping your immune system strong and reducing the risk of illness.

Practice “Respiratory Etiquette.”

It is best to avoid coughing into your hands. Cover your cough with a tissue or handkerchief or cough into your elbow or underarm area. Wash your hands frequently or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer to reduce the spread of organisms that can cause illness. When ill, stay away from others, if possible.

Get vaccinated.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that all individuals age 6 months or older receive the annual flu vaccine, unless they have a history of a severe allergic reaction to eggs, prior allergic reaction to the flu vaccine, or prior history of Guillain-Barre Syndrome. It's ideal to get vaccinated early in the flu season, but even as late as January, it's still a good idea to get vaccinated.

Since pneumonia is the leading cause of vaccine-preventable death in the U.S., seniors should also get the pneumonia vaccine. It is typically given at age 60 and

is usually a one-time injection for most individuals.

Take steps to prevent falls.

Choose carefully whether to go outside in slippery conditions. If you have to, be sure to wear appropriate footwear and for added support use your walking device, handrails or rely on others to provide assistance. If in doubt, stay indoors and try to get your groceries and prescriptions delivered.

Don't forget to exercise.

Research is uncovering a link between moderate, regular exercise and a strong immune system. In the winter months, there are many strength and flexibility exercises that can be done at home. “For endurance, long hallways and indoor malls provide a great option for keeping up your walking routine,” recommends Suzi Klyber, an Occupational Therapist with THE MEDICAL TEAM who works with seniors in their homes to help them develop ways to modify or adapt activities.

Maintain good nutrition.

Stay hydrated and eat plenty of fruits and vegetables. Boost your diet with immunity-strengthening probiotics found in yogurts, some juices, certain soy beverages, and also available in supplement form. Also, minimize your use of tobacco and alcohol.

Don't get “SAD.”

Seasonal Affective Disorder (also called SAD) is a type of depression. Generally symptoms start in the fall and may continue into the winter months. Don't brush it off as just a case of the “winter blues” that you have to tough out on your own. Try to make your environment sunnier, get outside when you can and exercise regularly. “Be sure to talk with your doctor if these coping techniques do not help. You may benefit from medication, psychotherapy or light therapy,” says Karen A. Briskie, RN, MSN, Director of THE MEDICAL TEAM's Journey program, a specialty clinical care program which helps seniors affected by depression.

Don't overexert yourself.

Cold weather can bring health risks that affect the heart, especially for individuals with cardiovascular disease. Be cautious when shoveling snow, since sudden exertion can trigger a heart incident. To avoid hypothermia, wear layers of clothing, avoid alcohol when going outdoors and keep the thermostat high enough indoors to keep warm. GRL

Sources: *Exercise and Immunity*, www.about.com; *Seasonal Affective Disorder*, www.mayoclinic.com; *Winter Nutrition Tips*, www.livestrong.com; *Cold and Flu*, www.about.com.

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