

Health Tips

Your Good Health Information From eDocAmerica

with

Dr. D



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Health Tip: Medical Fact or Fiction

Now for another episode of Medical Fact or Fiction, this time related to wintertime issues. See if you know the answers to the following true/false questions. Read on to get the "facts".

- Can a flu shot cause you to get the flu?
- Is drinking alcohol an effective treatment for hypothermia?
- Can becoming chilled cause you to catch a "cold"?
- Does hand washing help prevent catching colds?

Can a flu shot cause you to get the flu?

The flu vaccine cannot cause influenza because it does not contain live virus. In a survey performed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in 2004, however, about a third of people who responded



thought that it could. There are a number of reasons for this common misconception. Rarely, the flu shot causes uncomfortable side effects such as fever, fatigue and muscle aches that could be interpreted as being the flu. Usually, however, the side effects are very mild, primarily consisting of soreness at the site of the injection. A second reason is because of the lag between receiving the shot and receiving immunity. Since it can take up to 2 weeks for the flu shot to provide protection, it is possible that one could have been exposed to the flu virus

prior to the development of immunity. Occasionally, other viral illnesses, such as the common cold, are mistaken for the flu. Lastly, since the flu shot is not 100% effective, it is possible that someone could contract the flu despite receiving the vaccination. A flu shot gives you the best chance for avoiding the flu, but it can't guarantee that you won't get sick.

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Is drinking alcohol an effective treatment for hypothermia?

Despite the tradition of St. Bernard dogs carrying casks of brandy for treating avalanche victims in the Alps, alcohol is not effective for treating hypothermia. Alcohol may feel like it warms the body, but that's because it flushes the skin with warm blood. Once the blood is at the surface of the skin, heat is rapidly

lost through convection. You feel warm to touch, but at the same time, you're losing more heat from your skin, so your core body temperature actually decreases.



Does becoming chilled cause a "cold"?

According to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, getting chilled does not cause a cold. This organization attributes the increased frequency of colds during the cold season to factors such as school being in session and the fact that people are in closer proximity

during the winter because they tend to stay indoors, increasing the risk for exposure to cold viruses.

Recent research, however, is shedding new light on this topic. Perhaps what your mother said is true after all. A group of British researchers believe that they have proof that becoming chilled can foster the development of colds. In a study involving 180 volunteers, half were required to immerse their feet in ice water for 20 minutes. The others sat with their feet in an empty bowl. During the next four or five days, almost a third (29 percent) of the chilled volunteers developed cold symptoms -- compared to just 9 percent in the control group.

The explanation offered by one of the researchers is that "when colds are circulating in the community many people are mildly infected but show no symptoms. If they become chilled this causes a pronounced constriction of the blood vessels in the nose and shuts off the warm blood that supplies the white cells that fight infection. The reduced defenses in the nose allow the virus to get stronger and common cold symptoms develop. Although the chilled subject believes they have "caught a cold" what has in fact happened is that the dormant infection has "taken hold." Mothers can now be more confident in their advice to children to wrap up well in winter.

Does hand washing help prevent catching colds?

You bet it does, as well as helping to prevent the flu, other common viral illnesses, and food poisoning. Hand washing is one of the simplest, easiest, and most effective public health measures. Amazingly, it is also one of the most overlooked. Examples of when hand washing should be done include:

- after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing,
- when caring for someone who is sick or injured,
- after using the bathroom,
- after touching your ears, nose, or mouth
- after changing diapers.



Health care experts recommend scrubbing your hands vigorously for at least 15 seconds with warm soap and water; about as long as it takes to recite the alphabet. This will wash away cold viruses and many other disease-causing germs. It also will help prevent accidentally passing those germs on to others.

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