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## **How to Avoid the Cold**

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Those of you battling a midwinter cold may be warmed by the findings of a new study that examined the association between exercise and symptoms of the common cold. The study (research done at the University of South Carolina) determined that "subjects who were even moderately active had 20 percent fewer colds than their counterparts. Those who were most active had the fewest colds per year". The researchers concluded that "moderate levels of physical activity are associated with a reduced risk of URTI (upper-respiratory tract infections)." (*Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, 34:1242-8; 2002).

Moderate exercise has been shown to boost the number of white blood cells - the body's main defense against disease. With each session, the body temporarily elevates the white cells that destroy foreign microbes and stimulates production of antibodies and other substances that attack invaders.

Regular exercise may also increase white blood cells over the long term. Studies show that people who go from being inactive to working out regularly - and moderately - show the greatest improvement in boosted immunity. Regular moderate exercise helps ward off minor infections but exhausting exercising impairs the immune response.

It was found that runners who are committed to regular exercise have fewer infectious illnesses. But after heavy training or running a marathon, runners tend to experience more illness than others. For athletes who overdo it, the damaging effects of stress can outweigh the benefits of physical activity.

If after exercise you are exhausted and fatigued with muscle pain, unsteadiness, profuse sweating, or if you can't talk during an intense workout - you may be a perfect candidate for diminished immunity.

So how do we exercise moderately? Moderate exercise can be different things to different people depending on the shape you are in. One way of telling if you are working out moderately and getting the health benefits is by monitoring your heart rate. Your training range should be between 60 percent and 80 percent of your predicted maximum heart rate. (To find your predicted maximum heart rate takes 220 minus your age and then multiply by 60 percent and 80 percent to give you a range for your training heart rate. This method has a variability of plus or minus 10 - 20 beats per minute. In addition, women generally have a higher heart rate response than men for the same output. Recent research has also shown that older individuals (over age 65) may have significantly higher maximum heart rates than predicted when using this formula.

Another excellent way to monitor intensity is to use "rate of perceived exertion". On a scale of 0 to 10 an individual should exercise between a RPE of five (somewhat strong) and a RPE of seven (strong). Ideally, monitoring with both methods will insure closer observation.

A lot of athletes get into the habit of keeping track of their resting heart rate. The best time for taking your resting heart rate is in the morning when you first get up - before caffeine, stress and other factors throughout the day can affect it. If your resting heart rate has an increase of eight to 10 beats per minute, it means something is going on. It could be your body is fighting infection, or it could be that your body is overtired. It's a signal for you to back off for a day or two, or to take a rest.

Moderate exercise can even reverse the decline in immune function that comes with aging - especially important for seniors, who face more serious consequences when hit with flu.

Researchers are also finding that exercise can prevent more serious illnesses such as cancer. The basic theory is that exercise bolsters the immune system which can help the body attack cancer cells before they develop into tumors.

So, should you exercise when you feel under the weather? Here's what the experts say: If your symptoms are above the neck - that is if you're sniffing or have sinus congestion, you can continue to exercise without any ill effects - as long as you take it easy. A light workout won't hurt if you have a mild cold. However, if your symptoms are below the neck - coughing, chest congestion, muscle aches, etc. - you need to avoid exercising. Your body needs its energy to fight off the illness. If you do workout while your immune system is fighting an infection such as influenza, pneumonia, or bronchitis - it will only take longer for you to get well and you do risk taking a turn for the worse.

Lastly, researchers from the University of Wisconsin just completed a study (a randomized, double-blind, community-based trial) that found that "the popular herb echinacea is no more effective than a placebo when it comes to treating the common cold". The findings of this study were published in the December 17, 2002, issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

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