

LIFESTYLE

10 COLD/FLU REMEDIES

Immunize yourself the natural way

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Special to The Japan Times

As the temperature dips lower in January and February we often encounter an expected but not exactly welcome house guest — the winter cold, or the even more demanding and obnoxious visitor, the flu. The cold brings a headache, sore throat, congestion, runny nose, sneezing and exhaustion. If it's the flu, you can plan on body aches and a fever along with everything else. Naturally, you want to get rid of these guests as soon as possible.

The common cold is caused by any one of around 300 different viruses. These viruses evolve and mutate from one season to the next, which is why it's impossible to develop a single vaccine effective against them all. Over-the-counter medications can't prevent the common cold or flu either. In fact, over the long term, these medications can often make matters worse. Decongestants and antihistamines may treat obvious cold symptoms, but not the underlying infection. On top of that, they can actually suppress the body's natural response — fevers, sneezing, coughing, etc. — to rid itself of an unwelcome intruder.

No one wants endure an untreated cold or flu. Thankfully, there are natural ways to strengthen your immune system and shorten a cold's duration and severity. Prevention is always better than cure, and a strong immune system is the best defense against all infections. So here are some of the most useful natural remedies that can make the difference between winter well-being, and a lot of Kleenex and misery.

Echinacea

Echinacea, or purple coneflower, has been used by Native American Indians for hundreds of years. In the 1930s, it became popular in Europe and the United States as a folk medicine. It lost its popularity with the arrival of antibiotics, which, ironically, only work against infections caused by bacteria — viruses, not bacteria, cause the common cold. Today in Germany, echinacea still remains the main remedy for minor respiratory infections and for good reason: it works.

Echinacea increases the "nonspecific" activity of the immune system; unlike a vaccine, which is active against a specific disease, echinacea stimulates the overall activity of the cells responsible for fighting all kinds of infections. It's been shown to boost the production of a substance called interferon, which helps the body fight viral infections.

To get the benefits of this immune-boosting herb, take it at the first sign of a sniffle, or at the possibility of an infection (e.g. as soon as a family member gets a



BANISH SNIFFLES — The cold/flu season is upon us, but with some preventative measures, you might able to ward off illness. AP PHOTO

cold). Echinacea can also be used at a lower dose to help prevent a cold or flu. But don't take it all winter long, as high doses for extended periods may eventually lead to a depressed immune system.

There are three main species of Echinacea: Echinacea purpurea, E. angustifolia and E. pallida. Echinacea purpurea has the best supporting evidence for effectiveness in treating colds and flus. At the onset of an infection, take 3-4 ml of echinacea in a liquid preparation or 300 mg of a powdered form in a capsule or tablet, every two hours for the first day of a cold or flu, then three times per day for a total of seven to 10 days.

Caution: Echinacea is an immune system stimulator, so it's not recommended for people with autoimmune disease (e.g. lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis). Pregnant women or those allergic to plants of the sunflower (Asteraceae) family should also avoid it.

Vitamin C

Everyone's need for vitamin C goes up dramatically when you get a cold. Animals our size that synthesize their own vitamin C produce dozens of grams when stressed by an infection. For example, an adult goat will manufacture more than 13,000 mg of vitamin C per day and as much as 100,000 mg daily when faced with life-threatening disease, trauma or stress.

We humans don't synthesize, but by taking a high enough dose you can stop a cold dead in its tracks. Once an illness has taken hold, the body's response to vitamin C is called a "threshold" response where very little happens until a high enough dose is reached, then everything happens — fever subsides, organisms are killed and you generally start feeling better. Vitamin C does this by boosting interferon (a natural antiviral substance) as well as antibody levels in the body.

At the first hint of a scratchy throat or sneezing, take 500-3,000 mg of vitamin C with a glass of water every hour. If this causes diarrhea or an up-

set stomach, reduce the dose until digestion settles down again. You can also shorten the length and severity of a cold after you get one, but again you have to take enough vitamin C to do the job.

Zinc

If vitamin C is the "super immunity" vitamin, then zinc may just be the super immunity mineral. Zinc boosts the development and production of white blood cells which are vitally important cells in fighting off foreign bacteria and viruses.

Zinc lozenges can help prevent viruses from attaching to the back of your throat. Suck on zinc lozenges containing zinc gluconate, zinc gluconate-glycine or zinc acetate, providing 13-25 mg every few hours, for the first few days of a cold or flu. Swish and gargle some of the dissolved zinc, contacting as many mouth and throat surfaces as possible with the solution, as this will help kill the microorganisms by direct contact. Taken as a nasal gel application, zinc also appears to markedly shorten the duration of a cold.

Caution: Don't take high doses of zinc for many weeks at a time as it can cause a copper deficiency.

Garlic

Because of its strong odor, garlic is sometimes called the "stinking rose" and many people joke that garlic makes you smell so bad that people stay away from you, so you don't catch their cold. However, evidence suggests that it does work. This pungent herb was highly valued by the ancient Egyptians, who ensured that the slaves building the Great Pyramids were given a daily supply. The Romans also fed it to their soldiers before battle.

Garlic increases the activity of immune cells, and has a number of antifungal and anti-yeast properties. It also contains a compound, called allicin, which is a potent natural antibiotic. Opt for a garlic supplement or one to two cloves of raw garlic to ward off colds and perhaps anyone you wish to avoid.

Ginseng

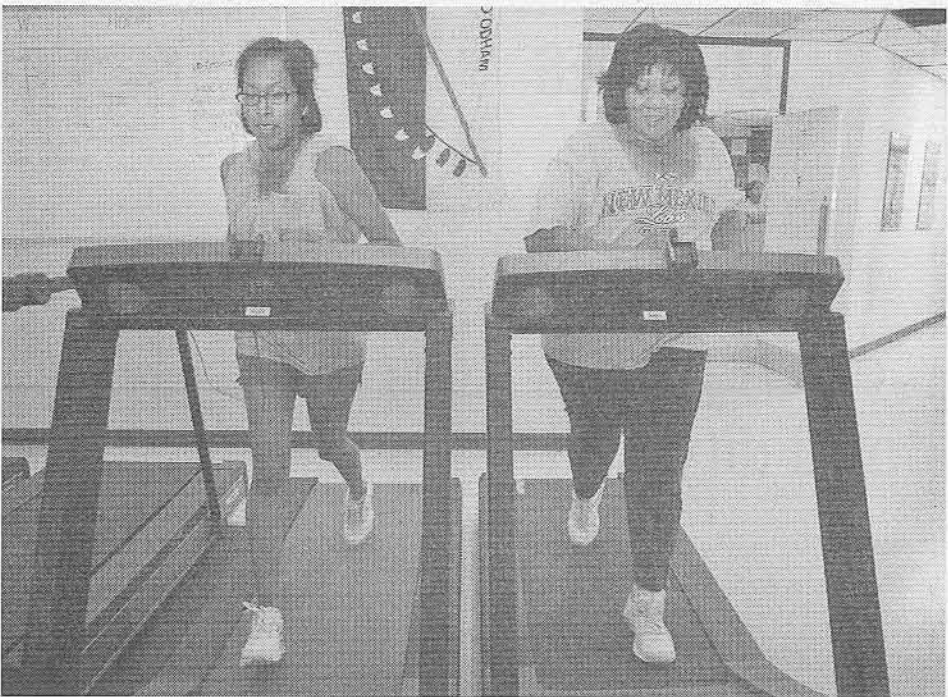
For 5,000 years Asians have revered ginseng as a longevity tonic. Ginseng (Panax) is a family of about five or six species of slow-growing plants with fleshy roots including North American ginseng (Panax quinquefolium), Siberian ginseng (Eleutherococcus senticosus) and Chinese/Korean ginseng (Panax ginseng).

The various species of ginseng are each purported to enhance immune function and a recent Canadian study using North American ginseng found it to be effective in keeping the common cold at bay. An extract of ginseng was given to people who usually suffered colds, and it resulted in significantly less colds, with less severe symptoms, than the placebo group.

Caution: Don't take American ginseng if you have a fever or any other signs of acute infection, or if you have high blood pressure, heart disease or hypoglycemia.

Mushrooms

The French prize their truffles, but even truffles and other edible fungi don't show as much potential as shiitake (Len-



Want a natural cold remedy? Try light exercise, Japanese mushrooms or zinc supplements. AP/YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTOS

tinus edodes), maitake (Grifola frondosa) and reishi (Ganoderma lucidum) mushrooms. In Japan and China, mushrooms have long been treated much like herbs, and these three species have been used for centuries to strengthen the immune system and promote longevity.

Shiitake contains a compound called lentinan, which stimulates the activity and production of many important immune system cells including T-cells — the body's own defense against viruses — and white blood cells. Maitake is also used to enhance the immune system. Reishi mushrooms, also known as the mushroom of immortality, have been found to stimulate specific immune cells such as macrophages.

Maitake, shiitake and reishi are available in supplement form, sometimes in combination.

Andrographis

Andrographis (Andrographis paniculata) is a shrub found throughout India and other Asian countries. It's sometimes called "Indian echinacea" because it is believed to provide much of the same benefits. It has been used during epidemics, including the Indian flu epidemic in 1919 when andrographis was credited with helping to stop the spread of the disease. A member of the Acanthaceae plant family, it is also widely used in Scandinavian countries to treat and prevent common colds. A number of studies have found that andrographis significantly reduces the duration and severity of cold symptoms.

Take 500-3,000 mg of dried Andrographis in capsule form three times per day at the onset of a cold.

Caution: Andrographis should be avoided by women who are pregnant or who wish to become pregnant, as it exhibits antifertility effects.

Oscillococinum

Many people swear by the homeopathic remedy "oscillococinum" for the flu. It's even the number one flu medicine in France, more popular than any conventional medicine.

Oscillococinum is made from the heart and liver of a duck. Scientists have discovered that the majority of ducks carry virtually every known influenza virus in their digestive tract. So you can perhaps think of oscillococinum as the homeopathic version of a chicken soup. Oscillococinum has been effective at warding off the flu if taken within 48 hours of the earliest symptoms. Symptoms may be vague, and include feeling vulnerable, irritable or just not quite right.



Oscillococinum comes in small vials. Dissolve the entire contents of one tube in your mouth, usually under your tongue, at the first sign of a flu. Repeat this every six hours, up to three times a day for three days. Don't eat or drink anything for 15 minutes before or after.

Exercise

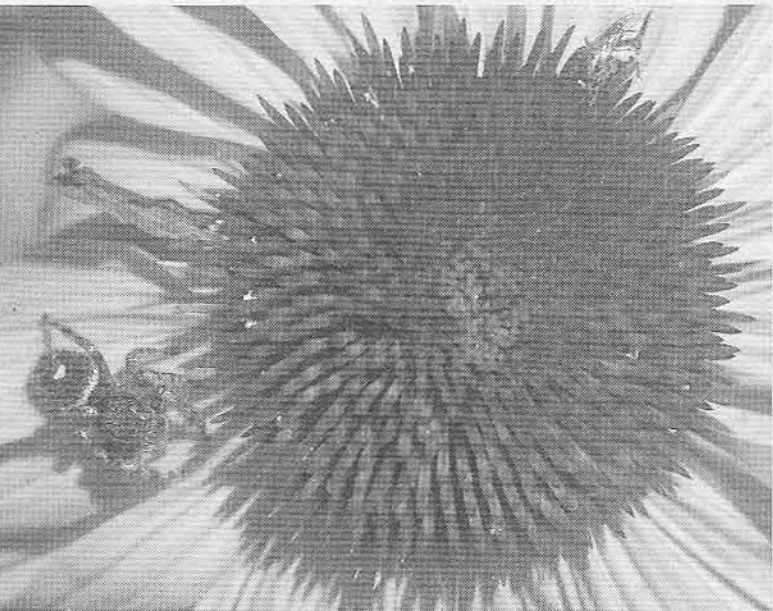
Don't let the cold weather be an excuse not to get your exercise as research has found that people who exercise regularly experience 25 percent fewer colds than those whose daily activities are relatively low. The benefits of a reduced risk of colds can be attained with moderate physical activity each day, such as a 30-minute walk. But high levels of physical activity may have the opposite effect; exercising too vigorously, such as marathon training, can deplete the immune system defenses, leaving you more vulnerable. So aim for moderate regular exercise such as a 30-minute walk five times a week.

Sleep and de-stress

Colds and flus strike when people are under stress, overworked or sleep deprived. Sleep is a natural requirement for effective prevention and speedy recuperation. When the body is denied sleep, its production of the white blood cells that fight off microbes slows down. So no matter how well you cover the other areas of your health, sleep deprivation will cause an eventual breakdown. Aim for seven to eight hours of sleep every night and try to find ways to manage stress effectively. If you do get a cold or the flu, rest and sleep are critical for recuperation.

Remember, serious conditions such as sinus infections, bronchitis, meningitis, strep throat and asthma can masquerade as the common cold. If symptoms continue beyond a week or are accompanied by a high fever, persistent cough, swollen glands or greenish nasal secretions, it could signify a more serious problem, so consult a doctor.

Here's to a happy, healthy winter.



HEAVY AMMO — Echinacea (above), vitamin C and garlic can all boost your immune system.

