

House Calls

Summer Cold Solutions

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

Sun, surf, sand...sniffles? Just when you were enjoying your long awaited Outer Banks vacation, you start to feel that little scratch in the back of your throat. You dismiss it at first, but then the sneezing and the coughing settles in. The next thing you know, you are suffering from a full blown summer cold, replacing your usual poolside beverages with grandma's chicken noodle soup.

Taking a hanky to the beach can definitely put a damper on your summertime fun. As with most illnesses, prevention is the key to your health. Colds are similar to the flu in that they are caused by a virus, are contagious, and cannot be cured by taking an antibiotic. We were reminded of ways to avoid contracting viruses this spring with the increased media coverage of the H1N1 (swine) flu. The same types of practices should be followed throughout the year-even in the summer- to avoid colds as well. Frequent hand washing is the number one way to prevent spread of disease, and needs to become second nature to all of us. Luckily, some of the other preventative measures occur naturally during the summertime without us even thinking about them. Such as getting plenty of fresh air and exercise, which we tend to do more readily when the beautiful Outer Banks sun is shining down on us. Some people, for various reasons, prefer to stay indoors in the cool air, just remember that getting fresh air decreases your chances of contracting a virus, so try to go outside once the midday sun has gone down, or early in the morning. Doing some form of aerobic exercise regularly, even if it is brisk walking, actually helps increase the body's natural virus-killing cells. Drinking plenty of water keeps your system flushed, and rehydrates you. Of course it is important to drink water all year around, even more importantly in the summer, since you tend to perspire more in the heat, and need to replenish that lost fluid. A healthy adult should aim for at least eight 8-ounce glasses of water each day. Eating fresh fruits and vegetables is a little easier in the summertime, since it is when they are locally grown. These 'plant' foods are supercharged with natural vitamins and minerals, which aid in boosting our immunity to combat the spread of colds and flu.

Being on vacation tends to give us a carefree attitude, and we sometimes forget that we need to take care of ourselves. Even though you may want to be in 'party mode' 24 hours a day for the week or two you are here, it is wise to try to avoid heavy alcohol consumption and tobacco use. Statistics show that heavy smokers get more severe colds and more frequent ones, and even being around smoke can profoundly decrease your immune system. Heavy alcohol use also suppresses your immune system in a variety of ways. Heavier drinkers are more prone to initial infections as well as secondary complications to those infections. Alcohol also dehydrates the body- actually taking more fluids from your system than it puts in.

Some good news is that another good way of avoiding a summer cold is exactly what you came on vacation to do...relax. If you can teach yourself to relax, you can activate your immune system on demand. There is medical evidence that if you put your relaxation skills into action, cells in your body's immune system that respond against cold and flu viruses increase in the bloodstream. So go ahead-take a brisk morning walk on the beach, have a healthy garden salad for lunch, sit by the pool with a nice tall cool drink (of water) and relax! Have a healthy summer vacation.

Rikki Schuster is a certified physician assistant with 14 years of experience practicing medicine. She can treat your non-emergent conditions while you're on vacation through Medical House Calls, and may be reached by calling 252-475-2007. obxmedicalhousecalls.com.