

The Truth Behind Mom's Cold and Flu Advice

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WebMD Feature

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Mom may have your best interest at heart, but does she actually know what's best when it comes to [coping with colds](#) and [flu](#)? While some common mom-approved tips are spot-on, others are totally bogus -- and there's a lot of gray area in the middle. Read on as we reveal the facts you need to help protect yourself.

Mom said: "Don't even think about going outside without a jacket."

The reality: When the temperature dips well below freezing, it's smart to grab a coat, hat, and gloves before you step outside. (You probably ought to dry your wet [hair](#) as well.) These commonsense measures will help keep you warm and cozy, plus they'll protect you from [frostbite](#) and [hypothermia](#). But here's where mom got it wrong: Feeling chilly does not make you any more likely to catch a [cold](#).

[Colds](#) are caused by viruses, period. While you may be more prone to getting sick during the winter, the blustery winds outside have nothing to do with it. A bigger issue is that people tend to spend most of their time indoors, which makes it easier for germs to spread, explains Andrew Pekosz, PhD, professor of molecular microbiology and immunology at Johns Hopkins University.

Still, you may be wondering if temperature changes can mess with your resistance and make you more vulnerable to picking up a bug. False, Pekosz says. "I haven't seen any hard scientific data to back that up."

Mom said: "Chicken soup is the best cure for the common cold."

The reality: "Cure" is a big overstatement, but mom was on to something: [Soup](#) is mostly liquid, and staying hydrated may help you feel better and heal faster, Pekosz says. Plus a bowl of hot, steamy broth can temporarily ease a stuffy nose.

Chicken also contains an amino acid called cysteine, which can help thin [mucus](#). "It's similar to a drug, [acetylcysteine](#), that is sometimes prescribed to people who have [bronchitis](#)," says Peter Richel, MD, chief of pediatrics at Northern Westchester Hospital.

Mom said: "Wash your hands!"

The reality: Mom wins this round. Frequent hand washing is one of the best things you can do to avoid catching whatever bugs might be going around. The key to making it count is doing it right: You need to use lots of soapy water and scrub for at least 20 seconds. You should also think about what you're touching right afterward, Pekosz says. If you're in a public restroom, use a paper towel instead of your bare hand when you touch the door handle. At home, you should regularly disinfect doorknobs with Lysol spray or disinfectant wipes. And don't forget about your germmy computer keyboard. Pekosz says it's a good idea to run a disinfectant wipe over those keys.

Mom said: "Take a multivitamin."

The reality: Sorry, mom. There's no proof that taking a multivitamin will prevent you from falling ill. "Vitamins are not a magic wand," Richel says. If reducing your number of sick days is your goal, you're better off focusing on eating healthfully, drinking lots of fluids, and getting enough rest. But he does think multivitamins have some merits. "How many parents can honestly say, 'My child is a star eater who gets enough from all of the major food groups on a weekly basis'?" Richel asks. "There's no evidence that they'll prevent [colds](#) or [flu](#), but multivitamins may round out the diet."

Mom said: "Get lots of vitamin C."

The reality: Don't bother gulping glasses of OJ or popping mega-doses of C when you get the sniffles. "Juice is hydrating, and a little extra [vitamin C](#) is not a bad thing," Richel says. But many studies have found that taking extra C at the beginning of a cold does pretty much nothing. Using vitamin C as a preventive measure -- say, during the entire winter to reduce your risk of getting sick -- won't help most people, either, though it did cut the incidence of colds in half among soldiers, skiers, and marathon runners who exercised in cold climates.

Mom said: "Feeling nauseous? Sip some ginger ale."

The reality: [The flu](#) mainly causes respiratory problems, along with [fever](#) and muscle aches. But some people (especially children) also end up with [vomiting](#) and [diarrhea](#), which is no fun for anyone. Is [ginger](#) the fix? Research has shown that it can indeed help. It may even work as well as the medication [metoclopramide](#).

That said, there are a few things to consider before pouring a glass of pop. First, carbonation can irritate the [stomach](#) lining, so Richel recommends using flat soda. To take the bubbles out quickly, fill a glass halfway with soda, then top it with 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon of sugar. "It will erupt a little, then go instantly flat," says Richel. Of course this will make an already sweet beverage even sweeter, but Richel says not to worry about the sugar content when you're nauseous or [vomiting](#).

You might be better off with ginger capsules, powder, or a [tea](#) made from fresh ginger root. It seems the name "ginger ale" may be misleading. "The stuff you buy in the grocery store doesn't usually have a lot of ginger in it," Pekosz says. (Most brands simply list "natural flavors" among the ingredients, so it's impossible to tell how much ginger, if any, is in the drink.)

Mom said: "Feed a cold, starve a fever."

The reality: No one's exactly sure how this notion got started, but you can ignore it. What your body needs most when you're ill is hydration, Richel says, but there's no reason to deprive yourself of solids if you have an appetite. If you're in the mood to eat, even if your temp is soaring, go for it. Don't feel hungry when you have a cold? Focus on getting plenty of fluids and you'll be just fine.