Avoiding Colds and the Flu When You Have Lupus

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The Flu, Lupus and Winter Colds

It is influenza season again, and you will have to take measures to avoid this pesky illness. Unfortunately, when you have lupus getting the flu is more than an inconvenience — it could cause complications.

Your doctor may suggest you get a flu shot every year, which most of the time is a good idea. However, you may want to reconsider if you are on steroids, or in the middle of a flare-up. If this is the case, what should you do to avoid getting sick?

If you decide to put off taking the flu vaccination for whatever reason, whether it is your doctor's recommendation or you are having an exacerbation of symptoms, the best thing is taking preventative measures.

When my kids are in school, it means much more to me than gearing up for homework and earlier bedtimes. Once they enter those classroom doors they are exposed to what can seem like a petri dish of germs, from the common cold to stomach bugs to the flu.

With lupus, I feel vulnerable, because whatever they bring home, I will typically not only catch, but I also will not be able to get rid of it for a month. Being sick can trigger a flare and before I know it, I am in a cycle of illness that encompasses three or more months of my life.

Then, when the germs and lupus attack finally subsides, I catch something else. Lupus and the flu is a vicious cycle.

But the fact is you cannot live in a bubble (though it might be nice in the midst of flu season) and back-to-school is known for its onslaught of germ sharing.

So, here are a few ways to avoid and prevent winter colds with lupus.

Get Optimum Nutrition

I make an effort to drink lots of fluids. Sounds strange but I find that when I keep my body flushed out I am less likely to get sick. I take vitamins (a multivitamin, B-12 and B-6 and fish oil) but I do not do mega doses of anything and I avoid anything that says "boosts the immune system" because that can trigger a flare.

Stay away from food that is high in simple carbohydrates; this includes processed foods and food high in white flour and sugar. Add more complex carbohydrates to your lupus diet, like brown rice, whole wheat, fresh vegetables and fruit, and other natural foods.

Strive to Get Enough Sleep

Sleep is one the most important things that you need to be healthy. It helps the body repair itself and strengthens the immune system. People who do not get enough sleep get sick more often since they are more susceptible to viruses and other bugs in their environment.

Minimize Stress

Try things like the use of herbs and supplements, yoga, and meditation for stress relief and enhancement of sleep. Studies have shown that people with high stress and continuous worrying are more likely to get sick and catch the flu. Keeping the stress levels down will help prevent getting ill, and boost your energy levels as well.

Good Hand Washing

This is one intervention that is very obvious, yet many people do not practice good hand washing techniques on a regular basis. You need to scrub your hands for at least 15 seconds and take care to wash under the fingernails and between the fingers. Hand sanitizer is good to have on hand while out and about, however, it doesn't replace good hand washing.

I used to think it did not help much, but that was also when I just swished my hands with antibacterial soap and expected miracles. Now I use regular soap and I really give it a thorough rub, between fingers and around fingernail beds before I rinse well.

I also keep germ-killing wipes in the car for those days I pick the kids up and we are immediately off to do errands. I do fear overkill with germ killing products, but I fear the flu with lupus more.

Don't Forget the Kids!

When the kids first walk in the house after getting off the bus, I have created a routine of them removing their shoes, changing into "play clothes" (clothes that have not sucked up school germs all day) and washing their hands before having a snack. The kids think I just want to protect their good school clothes from rips and stains, which is a bonus, but not the real reason behind the routine.

Be sure that your kids and others around you cough into the crook of their arm at all times, not just when they are around you. Educate them and tell them that when they cough into the air, they spread germs and contaminate everything around them. Coughing into their hands is not a good option, but if they do so, they should go wash their hands immediately.

Avoid People Who Are Sick

Another obvious intervention, but it is the most effective next to hand washing. If you work in an office, keep hand sanitizer nearby and eat at your desk if there are sick people that may be using the break room.

I had an easier year last year with germs and I am hoping it is these strategies that did the trick. Only time will tell, but I believe that at the very least it feels better to be proactive in trying to protect your health as much as possible.