

# WINTER WELLNESS



- 7 Poses to Relieve Cold & Flu Symptoms
- Cold Comfort: Tune up Your Immune System
  - Stop Sniffles before They Start

From the Editors of **yoga**  
JOURNAL

# 7 Poses to Relieve Cold & Flu Symptoms

BY ANGELA PIRISI

Ask a dozen sniffing, sneezing people to talk about the bug they've caught, and you'll likely discover a pattern. Chances are good that before they came down with the cold or flu, they were working long hours, eating on-the-go, getting little sleep, operating at full-speed ahead. While not always the case, many people report that these winter afflictions creep up on them in times of stress, when they're pushing themselves too hard.

More and more, it seems that science backs up this observation. According to William Mitchell, N.D., a Seattle-based practitioner who teaches advanced naturopathic therapeutics at Bastyr University, studies show that many viruses and bacteria quietly reside within us until something within the body's internal environment becomes unbalanced. Then they rally into action and attack.

As many longtime yogis can attest, asana practice provides a gentle, natural means of supporting the immune system on a day-to-day basis — no matter how hectic your schedule might be. Yoga helps lower stress hormones that compromise the immune system, while also conditioning the lungs and respiratory tract, stimulating the lymphatic system to oust toxins from the body, and bringing oxygenated blood to the various organs to ensure their optimal function. "Yoga is unlike other forms of exercise that focus only on certain parts of the body," says Kathleen Fry, M.D., president of the American Holistic Medicine Association in Scottsdale, Arizona. "Yoga works on everything."

Mitchell, who teaches Paramukta Yoga (Yoga of Supreme Freedom), points to a number of poses that can help a practitioner get through a winter cold. Kurmasana (Tortoise Pose) supports the thymus. Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog) encourages blood flow to the sinuses — although Mitchell adds that most inverted postures or forward bends will focus the immune system on the sinuses, ultimately helping to ease congestion. These particular types of poses also



## Head Wrap

Before you begin, wrap your forehead to relieve tension in the head. Take a wide ace bandage (about 4 inches) and wrap it snugly around the head, tucking the free end in. You can also wrap it over the eyes, taking care not to wrap the eyes too tightly. The bandage will comfort your congested sinuses while you do the poses that follow.

work to prevent the complications of secondary infections by draining the lungs. If bronchial congestion has you gasping for air, Mitchell suggests you practice Ustrasana (Camel Pose), Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose), and Balasana (Child's Pose) with arms extended in front, moving into Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose) to open the chest and prevent pneumonia. Should you come down with the flu, however, it's best not to practice yoga at all, since the condition requires absolute rest. The one exception to this rule, according to Alice Claggett and Elandra Kirsten Meredith in their book *Yoga for Health and Healing: From the Teachings of Yogi Bhajan* (1995), is in the case of fever. Sitting in Sukhasana (Easy Pose), with the backs or sides of the hands resting on the knees, thumb and index finger touching in gyan (or jnana) mudra and breathing through a U-shaped tongue for a minimum of three minutes will help reduce a temperature.

So how does one begin an immune-boosting yoga program? Rest assured that whatever your current yoga practice entails, it already strengthens your resistance. But if you want to take extra steps to avoid infection, take this advice from Richard Rosen, frequent *YJ* contributor and instructor at Piedmont Yoga Studio in Oakland, California. He explains that modified versions of forward bends, backbends, and twists can all lend a hand in supporting and strengthening the immune system. Rosen suggests several key poses (shown here), along with a head wrap developed by B.K.S. Iyengar. Practice the sequence regularly throughout the winter to better your chances of staying healthy. And if you do succumb to illness, you'll find these poses provide just the R & R you need to get better.



### Standing Forward Bend

(Uttanasana)

Brings energy to the head and respiratory area; helps clear the sinuses.

Stand with your feet hip-width apart and rest your forearms on a chair seat. You can also place a blanket on the chair seat for extra padding. Hold two to five minutes.



### Supported Bridge Pose

(Salamba Setu Bandhasana)

Opens up the chest and increases circulation to the upper torso.

Align two bolsters or two to four blankets on the floor running the entire length of your body (the height of the support can vary from 6 to 12 inches). Sit on the middle of the support and lie back. Slide towards your head until your shoulders lightly touch the floor. Open your arms out to the sides, palms turned up. Rest with your legs stretched out on the bolster or with your knees bent and your feet on the floor. Relax for a minimum of five minutes.

## Supported Bound Angle Pose

(Salamba Baddha Konasana)

Opens the chest, abdomen, and groins; relaxes the nervous system.



Sit on the floor, knees bent towards the chest. Bring the soles of your feet together and let your knees open towards the floor. Support the outer thighs with folded blankets at a comfortable height. You can also place sandbags on each inner thigh to deepen relaxation. Release the arms out to the sides and let go of any tension. Relax in the pose for a minimum of five minutes.



## Legs Up the Wall Pose

(Viparita Karani)

Brings energy to the groin and opens the chest area to facilitate breathing.

With the back of the pelvis on a bolster placed 4 to 6 inches from the wall, swing the legs up the wall. Drop your sitting bones into the space between the blanket and the wall and open your arms out to the sides. If your hamstrings feel tight, try turning the legs slightly in, or move the bolster further away from the wall. Hold for a minimum of five minutes.



## Reclining Twist

(Modified Jathara  
Parivartanasana)

Releases physical and  
stress-based tension.



Lie on your back and with an exhalation bend your knees and draw your thighs to your torso. Shift your pelvis slightly to the left and, with another exhalation, swing your legs to the right and down to the floor (if they don't rest comfortably on the floor, support them on a bolster or folded blanket). Turn your upper torso to the left. Rest your right hand on the outer left knee and stretch your left arm to the side, in line with your shoulders. Look straight up or close your eyes. Relax for three minutes. Repeat on the other side.



## Widespread Forward Bend

(Upavistha Konasana)

Quiets the internal organs; relaxes the mind.

Sit on the floor with your sitting bones on the edge of a folded blanket. Straighten your legs out in front of you and then separate them as far as you comfortably can. Rest your upper torso on a bolster or (if you're more stiff) a chair seat. If you are using a chair, you can fold your forearms on the seat for more height and padding. Hold the pose for three to five minutes.



Steaming your sinuses with herbs such as eucalyptus can help relieve congestion and put you on the path to wellness.

# Cold Comfort

Rather than rely on cold medicines to suppress symptoms, tune up your immune system and help your body heal itself this winter.

BY ANGELA PIRISI

**Ever wonder why** some of us fall constant prey to seasonal colds and flu, while others waltz through winter without so much as a sniffle? If you find yourself among the bed-ridden, you can certainly lay some blame on the fact that viruses thrive in cold, damp conditions. Your body, meanwhile, must adapt to winter's climactic changes at a time when you're spending your days mostly indoors in close contact with others.

But that still doesn't answer the question you're probably pondering: Why me? Compelling new research has some scientists now arguing that colds and flu aren't just a simple matter of viral exposure. A recent study at UCLA revealed that subjecting healthy people to someone contaminated with a cold for 48 hours did not give the healthy subjects a cold. The conclusion? Colds result not from a cold virus, but from "an internal disturbance of the body's immune system," according to the researchers.

Before figuring out how, in addition to yoga, you can bolster your defenses, it helps to understand what you're dealing with—and how your body defends itself. Colds and flu wreak havoc in different ways. The common cold may be caused by a number of viruses, some of which can lead to secondary bacterial infections such as bronchitis, strep throat, and pneumonia. Cold viruses inflame the mucous membranes lining the upper respiratory system. The flu virus, on the other hand, comes in three different strains and infects the entire respiratory tract. The flu, therefore, has a higher capability of leading to serious complications.

As you probably know first-hand, colds and flu quickly throw a well-ordered immune system into chaos. But while the prevailing onslaught of symptoms (coughing, sneezing, congestion, runny nose) may be uncomfortable, they signal a counterattack being waged by the body against the viral intruder. As William Mitchell, N.D., explains, the body tries to make life unpleasant enough for a virus



or bacteria that it will want to leave. “The body does this in a number of ways,” he says. “It withholds iron so that microbes can’t use it to fuel up; excretes free radicals; raises the temperature; slightly changes the pH balance in tissues; and engulfs a microbe through a process called phagocytosis.”

The immune system is an elaborate communication network of defensive and offensive cells. At the helm are lymphocytes, a type of white blood cell that includes B cells and T cells. B cells produce antibodies that act like a stun gun to neutralize invading antigens in preparation for T cells to finish them off. Both keep an endless watch throughout the body. “Helper” T cells coordinate attacks on invaders, while “suppressor” T cells call the cease-fires.

T cells secrete proteins like interferon, which boasts antiviral properties. Meanwhile, the offensive is comprised of cells called macrophages that circulate in the blood and scavenge for foreign antigens in a perpetual search-and-destroy mission. Macrophages engulf unwanted bacteria, then destroy them with enzymes called lysosomes that they secrete.

Every one of these immune-system members performs a vital function in protecting the body—and they depend on teamwork to achieve their individual goals. B cells, for example, require T cells to recognize an intruder and then give them the go-ahead to generate the necessary antibodies. Likewise, just as in a real-life military outfit, a hole in the defense line can lead to a losing battle. For example, if lymphocytes are compromised by stress or a nutrient deficiency, everything else down the immune line can also malfunction.

Each of the resulting symptoms we experience has a healing or detoxifying function. Sneezing, for example, keeps the virus up and out of the lungs, while the increase in mucous secretions carries immunoglobulins to wash out toxins. That’s why holistic care practitioners counsel people against cold and flu medicines that work by suppressing symptoms, such as decongestants, cough syrups, and antipyretics (acetaminophen). While alleviating temporary discomfort, they inevitably prolong the illness by tampering with the body’s process of self-healing.

## Cold & Flu Insurance

If you’re looking for a way to bolster defenses, natural remedies are a good place to start. Herbal treatments work as immunotonics to help reinforce, balance, and strengthen the immune system. Some herbs prevent infections while others stop an infection or speed recovery.

For example, a regimen of either Siberian ginseng in doses of 500mg three

# Stop Sniffles **before They Start**

When it comes to colds and flu, prevention is the best medicine. Winterize your immune system with healthy doses of these vitamins and minerals.

---

**Beta Carotene** Improves tissue integrity. Take 25,000 IU daily, and you'll experience fewer colds.

---

**Vitamin B** A deficiency in folic acid has been shown to cause atrophy of the thymus and lymph glands. A low-potency B formula with B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>5</sub>, B<sub>12</sub>, and folic acid covers the bases. Vegetarians who get a lot of colds or flu should take extra B<sub>12</sub> and folic acid.

---

**Vitamin C** Take up to 5,000mg per day before cold and flu season and throughout. Try ascorbate, which is buffered, if diarrhea is a problem. Vitamin C is water-soluble, so any surplus gets excreted through urine, rather than stored in body fat tissue like vitamin A and other fat-soluble vitamins.

---

**Vitamin E** 400 IU daily, found in soybeans and grains such as whole wheat, enhances and activates the immune system's T cell function.

---

**Selenium** 200mcg daily helps promote the development and activity of all kinds of white blood cells.

---

**Zinc** Some research shows that supplementation in spring and fall can help ward off colds by building up immune proteins. Take 50mg per day. —*Angela Pirisi*

times a day, or 1,000mg daily of the amino acid lysine, can have a general antiviral, tonifying effect that fortifies the immune system. Chinese astragalus root, recently spotlighted in clinical trials, stimulates every phase of immune function. It increases the number of stem cells (the parent cells of all bodily tissues) and helps them develop into active immune cells, significantly enhancing macrophage activity, and consequently reducing the number and duration of colds.

Other more popularized treatments such as echinacea activate T cells and macrophages, improve antibody binding, increase the circulation of white blood cells, and enhance killer T cell activity. Study findings reported by the Herb Research Foundation show that echinacea can even increase phagocytosis (the consumption of invading organisms) by 20 to 40 percent.

Meanwhile, homeopathy, which is based on the principle of “like cures like,” features remedies made of super-diluted extractions from plant, animal, or mineral substances.

This treatment relies on the paradox that many substances, when taken full-strength or in a natural form, evoke the very symptoms they allay in a homeopathic dose. (For instance, a homeopathic dose of poison ivy will relieve the itching and burning caused by contact with the plant.) In the homeopathic view, explains Kathleen Fry, M.D., “Some people are more prone to infections because they are said to have a weak vital force, which is prana in ayurvedic medicine, or chi in traditional Chinese medicine. In such cases, they need a constitutional homeopathic treatment to fortify their immune system.” In terms of individual remedies, though, Fry suggests using gelsemium (yellow jasmine) for flu symptoms, “especially if you’re achy, anxious, or have weakness,” or a homeopathic dose of the otherwise toxic sulfuric acid for a sore throat. Homeopathic colds and flu kits are also available at health food stores.

Aside from homeopathic remedies, you have other natural means of symptom relief at your disposal. For a sinus infection, place a hot water bottle covered with a castor oil-soaked cloth over the sinus area for 20 to 40 minutes. For respiratory infections, try licorice, which has antiviral properties. Or try a soothing mix of licorice root, gum weed, and bloodroot for a dry cough and sore throat. (See “Herbs to Cure a Cold” for more home remedies.)

## A Dose of Common Sense

A cupboard full of cures will only take you so far in your search for good health, however, since lifestyle habits also play a crucial role. Think of pumping supreme gasoline into your car but not maintaining or repairing the vehicle in any

# Herbs to Cure a Cold

You're wise to the powers of garlic and lemon-ginger tea. You've stocked up on echinacea and a winter's supply of vitamin C. Now you're ready for whatever nasty infection comes your way—almost. Add these herbs to your healing repertoire and that cold won't stand a chance.

HERB	ACTION	DOSE
<b>Boneset</b> <i>Eupatorium perfoliatum</i>	Popular among eighteenth-century pioneers, this immune-stimulating herb has recently been proven as effective as echinacea (if not more so) in combating viral infections.	Take in homeopathic doses, following package instructions.
<b>Lian Qiao</b> <i>Forsythia suspensa</i>	The fruit of this Chinese shrub helps ease flu and cold symptoms.	Drink in a tea. Traditional Chinese formulas for colds, such as Yin Qiao San, also contain forsythia.
<b>Licorice Root</b> <i>Glycyrrhiza glabra</i>	An expectorant and antiviral aid, this root contains glycyrrhizin, an anti-inflammatory active ingredient that sweeps up free radicals.	Take as a tea or tincture (25 drops, four times daily). Do not take more than 15g per day or longer than six weeks (especially if you have hypertension, as large quantities of the herb have been shown to elevate blood pressure).
<b>Elder</b> <i>Sambucus nigra</i>	The flowers and berries of this tree help reduce fever by causing a mild sweat-inducing action. They also increase bronchial secretion and ease coughing.	Steep two teaspoons of herb in hot water for a tea. Drink up to several cups a day to relieve congestion.
<b>Astragalus</b> <i>Astragalus membranaceus</i>	A traditional Chinese tonic, the root of this herb stimulates the immune system and promotes energy and warmth.	Boil roots in water for 25 minutes and drink one cup of this decoction twice a day. Or take as tincture, following package instructions.
<b>Horehound</b> <i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	An effective expectorant, this bitter herb appears in many over-the-counter cough syrups and drops in Europe. It helps expel mucus in cases of bronchitis and wheezing.	Drink as tea (up to three cups per day), sweetened with honey. Try the tincture form (¼ to ½ teaspoon three times per day) if the tea is too bitter. —Jennifer Barrett

other way. Consider herbs and homeopathic medicine your reinforcements, while your living choices lay the foundation for strong viral resistance.

You're probably already acutely aware of the immune-compromising effects of stress, for instance. Stress in the body triggers the release of hormones from the adrenal glands, namely cortisol, which cause the thymus (the major immune-system gland) to shrink. This precipitates a cascade of events that suppress immune functions. At Ohio State University, researchers found that subjects who were more reactive to stress, such as medical students at exam time or those caring for a spouse with Alzheimer's, had a diminished immune response to inoculations of Hepatitis B and the influenza virus than their peers.

Sleep deprivation can yield similar harmful health consequences. According to the National Sleep Foundation, research suggests that sleep is associated with immune function—especially deep sleep or the non-REM phase of sleep, when immune-enhancing hormones such as interleukin-1 increase in production. One study showed that sleep loss decreased the rate of phagocytosis and the production of lymphocytes (a type of white blood cell).

Diet also weighs in the equation, since sugar, caffeine, alcohol, and fat all suppress various immune functions. Sugar reduces the ability of neutrophils to engulf and destroy bacteria, and compromises lymphocyte activity. Increased serum levels of cholesterol and triglyceride can compromise antibody production. Caffeine and alcohol raise stress levels; alcohol depletes vitamins C and B6, which the body particularly needs in times of infection. You should also avoid peanuts and chocolate during the cold and flu season since these contain arginine, a component that encourages viral growth.

And perhaps most important, according to the American Council on Exercise, physical activity increases natural killer cell activity. Even one bout of exercise can boost immune function for several hours afterwards, and this short-term boost appears to reduce risk of infection in the long term. All of this makes it clear that when it comes to colds and flu, the best offense is a good defense. Granted, some viruses will prevail despite your best efforts. But by integrating the elements of healthy living into your daily life, you can achieve a balance between mind and body that enriches immune function. And maybe this winter, you'll be the one sailing through with nary a sneeze or a sniffle. ■

---

Angela Pirisi is a health writer living in Toronto, Canada. In addition to her contributions to *Yoga Journal*, she writes for the British medical journal *The Lancet* and other publications.