

Keep the flu bug at bay

Health-care workers, who face all kinds of illnesses daily, give advice on how to stay healthy

Washington – Amid coughing, sneezing and ailing patients, hospital workers fight an uphill battle to keep themselves free of colds and flu. And so they are just the ones to turn to for advice on staying healthy.

"In our environment, we're exposed to communicable diseases every day," says Mr Martin Brown, medical director of Inova Alexandria Hospital's emergency room.

Wash your hands

Health-care professionals are fanatical about sanitising their hands, says Ms Laura Anderko, a nurse and associate professor at Georgetown University School of Nursing & Health Studies.

Mr Brown says he washes his hands hundreds of times a day – after seeing patients, using the keyboard, touching the telephone and before meals. He keeps an eye on a clock to ensure that he washes for at least a minute.

To ensure she washes her hands long enough, Ms Anderko sings Happy Birthday, making a point to lather up her thumbs.

Ms Geeta Nayyar, an assistant clinical professor of medicine at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences, carries hand sanitiser in her purse for times when she cannot access soap and water.

Clean surfaces

Johns Hopkins Hospital nurse Stacey Rotman routinely uses Lysol wipes to clean doorknobs and computers, and she wipes counters with bleach. She says her husband "rolls his eyes" at her cleaning regimen.

She says: "He knows I'm not anal retentive. But when he does get sick, I'm



PHOTO: AFP

Germ-free: Give your hands a good scrub with soap.

like, 'You didn't wash your hands long enough.'"

Get vaccinated

Do not let a busy schedule keep you from this task. It is easier to get vaccinated against the flu than in previous years, says Mr Peter Lavine, an orthopaedic surgeon and president of the Medical Society of the District of Columbia.

Drink fluids

When physicians and nurses do get sick,

drinking more fluids than usual is a big concern. "I drink anything that's hot and has a lot of liquid, such as wonton soup," Ms Nayyar says. "You lose your appetite generally when you're sick. You have fluid loss and you get dehydrated."

Take something when sick

When Ms Anderko had a cold recently, she immediately took zinc lozenges, which is believed to help decrease the duration and severity of colds. She also ate oranges to bulk up on Vitamin C. "I have a bowl of

oranges in the office. I was eating them non-stop when I thought I was coming down with something," she says.

Ms Rotman swears by Airborne, a combination of vitamins, herbs and minerals.

Mr Lavine says: "I'm very aggressive in treating myself if I get the flu. I immediately start on an antihistamine, decongestant and Tylenol to avoid chest congestion and deep chest coughs."

Stock your medicine cabinet

Our experts gravitate toward Vicks VapoRub, Tylenol, DayQuil, NyQuil, Mucinex, or the generic versions of these, and herbal remedies.

Ms Anderko learnt at nursing school that it is helpful to gargle with a little baking soda and warm water to alleviate swelling from a sore throat.

Even if your medicine cabinet is brimming with drugs, make sure you take only what your symptoms call for, Ms Anderko says.

And sometimes it is okay to lay off the medication. The common cold does not last very long, says Mr Brown, so "it's hard to tell when you're just getting better on your own or the medications are working".

Develop healthy habits

Ultimately, people need to be aware of their bodies and take care of themselves every day by getting enough rest, taking naps when appropriate, eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly.

"There's no magic," Ms Nayyar says. "It's just a matter of common sense."

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