If you’ve been sidelined by a cold or flu, you know how feeling bad can affect your overall attitude about life. However, it can hit you right in the pocketbook.

Doctor’s appointments, medicine and missed work means that Americans spend $40 billion each year on treating colds and flu. You may have your favorite method to shorten or reduce the symptoms of these common illnesses, but, today, let’s look at five ways to keep from getting sick or reduce your symptoms, without spending a dime.

Wash your hands. The one thing that makes the greatest difference in infection rates is to wash germs off your hands. Germs from cold and flu are passed on to others from small droplets that are sprayed out as you sneeze. How long they are viable depends on the surface they fall on. Those that are deposited on hard surfaces such as stainless steel and plastics last longer than on soft surfaces like fabrics. So keep the areas you touch clean and sanitized.

Though it is possible to get an infection from a contaminated object, it is far more likely to catch flu or a cold from an infected person. Wash your hands and avoid touching your nose or mouth, the moist places that germs take hold and start to grow.

Exercise. Getting active releases some of those feel good endorphins that allow us to fight germs. Research done in North Carolina showed that those who exercise had 46 percent fewer colds than their more sedentary colleagues. Not only does exercise help you feel better now, it fights off infection before it takes hold in your body.

Reduce stress. Stress takes its toll on the body and reduces your ability to fight off infections. If you are a victim of chronic stress, find a way to de-stress such as yoga or meditation. One study showed that a control group missed 67 days of work due to colds and flu, those who exercised missed 32 days, and those that meditated missed only 16 days. You are more protected by meditation than even if you exercise.
Those of us who are pet owners know that having that warm, cuddly animal is a perfect way to reduce stress. Pets relax you and de-stress you, which will help you stay healthier.

Sleep. Research shows that if you get less than seven hours of sleep a night you are three times more likely to catch a cold. Sleep to avoid a cold, but if you get one, rest to get well. When someone gets a cold, the best thing they can do to fight the infection is just to rest. If you are exhausted, you stay sick longer.

This one may surprise you. A recent research project showed that looking at people, or even pictures of people, who are sneezing resulted in an automatic increase in white blood cells. The perception that you might be exposed to germs may cause the immune system to kick into high gear and respond more aggressively to infection. I’d suggest just looking at pictures and not actually exposing yourself to the germs from sick people.

Be happy and optimistic. There is a protective factor in simply being positive. I’m not sure if a positive attitude keeps you from being sick or if it makes you get well faster. However it works, choosing to focus on feeling happy will make you feel better. Try it.

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