

Vaccines to brave a short winter



**YOUR
HEALTH**

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Winter in India usually lasts from around December 21 to the end of February. There is a noticeable chill across most of the country, though we do not experience the extreme conditions seen in many Northern Hemisphere nations, including snow, ice and sleet. Nevertheless, the drop in temperature and cold winds often catch people off guard, leading to increased seasonal health problems.

Respiratory infections tend to rise during winter. This is not because cold weather encourages bacteria or viruses to grow, but because people spend more time indoors, often huddled together. Close contact facilitates the spread of infections. Ventilation in homes and public places is often poor in winter because windows and doors are tightly closed to keep out cold air, allowing germs to circulate more easily.

Cold, dry air can irritate the airways when inhaled. This irritation causes the lining of the air passages to produce thick mucus. As a result, the airways can become clogged and narrowed, triggering coughing and wheezing, especially in people who are prone to asthma or allergies. If the environment is polluted with smoke or industrial emissions, these irritants can become trapped in the lungs. During winter, smog and cloudy skies often trap pollutants, keeping them near ground level where they are easily inhaled.

Winter air is particularly harmful for senior citizens and for those with underlying heart or lung conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and emphysema. Such individuals need to be especially careful during colder months. Staying indoors as much as possible is best when government advisories warn that pollution levels are unhealthy or hazardous.

Several simple measures can

help protect health during winter. Steam inhalation once or twice a day can loosen thick mucus and warm the airways, providing relief from congestion. An annual influenza vaccination is strongly recommended because flu viruses evolve each year. While the vaccine may not prevent infection entirely, it significantly reduces the severity of illness and the risk of complications. People aged 65 and older should also receive the pneumococcal vaccine, which protects against pneumococcal pneumonia. Unlike the flu shot, this is usually a one-time injection.

Winter is also a time of "silent dehydration". Even without exercise, thirst is often reduced in cold weather. Additionally, urination increases due to cold-induced diuresis, exacerbating fluid loss. Signs of dehydration include dry lips, dry skin and unexplained muscle cramps. It is essential to drink adequate fluids regularly. A simple way to assess hydration is by checking urine colour; it should be pale yellow, similar to light tea.

Dry, itchy skin is another common winter complaint.

Hot water baths strip the skin of its natural oils, worsening dryness. A nourishing oil mixture made with 250ml of coconut oil, 250ml of sesame oil, and 100ml of castor oil can be applied to the body and left on for 10 minutes before bathing. Adding 30ml of coconut oil to bathwater can also help. At night, applying a moisturiser or liquid paraffin to the whole body is beneficial. Applying coconut oil at night is best avoided, as it may attract insects.

Sunlight exposure is essential for Vitamin D production, and deficiency is common during winter. Supplements may be needed under medical advice. Dressing in one or two layers of clothing helps trap warm air between layers and maintain body heat.

Exercise should continue in winter but with caution. Poor visibility can make roads dangerous, so reflective clothing is important for walkers and runners. And cold muscles should always be warmed up before exercise to prevent injuries.

With these precautions, winter can be enjoyed safely before the heat of summer returns.



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