- Immune system

Why am I SICK... AGAIN?

It's puzzling: It seems as if everyone's under the weather more frequently these days than before the pandemic. But that perception may be a COVID mind trick. Here, top doctors help us piece together the truth.

BY KATE ROCKWOOD

You've likely noticed an unusual phenomenon unfolding since health officials deemed the COVID-19 worldwide emergency a thing of the past: Your sick days seem to run out faster than before. Friends cancel plans more often ("Not feeling well" is an all-too-familiar text), tissue boxes and cold medicine packages empty at an alarming rate, and every time you're finally feeling back up to snuff, bam, there's another sore throat or runny nose to contend with.

"It sure seems like we're getting sicker more often after the pandemic," says scientist and physician Dr William Li, author of the bestselling *Eat to Beat Disease: The New Science of How Your Body Can Heal Itself*.

But is that really the case, or are people just more anxious about every little sniffle and cough – a sort of post-pandemic stress response? The reality is complicated, and scientific evidence that could affect the answer is still incoming. But, as of now, health experts believe a petri dish of factors are influencing how we get ill and our response to it.

For one thing, the pandemic changed the way we think about sickness. Coughing, sneezing and a case of the shivers have taken on added significance, and constantly having to think about whether we're coming down with something has made us more vigilant about monitoring ourselves for potential health issues. "The smallest signs of feeling off are getting noticed more now than before," says dietitian and nutritionist Laura Iu, a certified intuitive eating counsellor. "It may not be that people are actually getting sick more often – they may just be more tuned in."

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IT'S NOT ALL IN YOUR HEAD

That's not to say there isn't actually more illness out there. Many COVID-19 precautions – including social distancing and mask wearing – have mostly gone away, lowering their impact in suppressing other illnesses.

At the same time, flu cases have spiked by the millions since the height of the pandemic. In 2024, Australia recorded the highest number of influenza cases on record, yet the first three months of 2025 saw more than a 50 per cent increase in the figures from the same time last year.

And there's been a huge rise in the incidence of 13 communicable diseases in 44 countries compared with before the pandemic, according to an analysis by London researchers. These include less common illnesses such as polio and tuberculosis as well as familiar ones such as influenza and RSV, which may suggest that our baseline immunity ►

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has shifted in recent years. A theory known as immunity debt contends that "the isolation society experienced during the pandemic led to a weakened immune system in many people, because ordinarily we would all be exposed to a variety of viruses in the usual course of activities," Dr Li explains.

On top of that, since we were exposed to fewer illnesses then, "Some people may have forgotten what it's like to be sick," adds epidemiologist Dr Aaron Glatt. This means we notice and worry about things we used to take in our stride.

Also, the viruses that make us ill are constantly evolving. Just as the COVID-19 virus consistently mutates to create new variants, other viruses like RSV and the flu do the same, and our immune systems may not have the antibodies needed to fend off new strains.

Then there's COVID-19 itself – which has settled in as a repeat offender alongside colds and the flu. In fact, a 2023 study found that COVID-19 seemed to be following a pattern of a major winter infection wave followed by smaller but still significant spring and summer surges – and that, in and of itself, means we're getting infiltrated by germs more often than ever before. COVID may have also triggered something called immunity theft, meaning the virus has altered our immune systems in a way that makes us more vulnerable to many diseases "ranging from infections to chronic illnesses like cardiovascular disease and even cancer," Dr Li explains.

HOW NOT TO GET SICK

So, how do we give our immune systems a fighting chance against sickness? The good-for-you lifestyle habits you already try to follow are also the building blocks of a strong immune system. These include getting regular exercise and quality sleep, focusing on stress relief and eating a nourishing diet.

Enjoy a variety of fruit, veg, wholegrains, proteins and healthy fats to ensure that you receive a constant supply of essential vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and other nutrients that'll help you stay well. "Specifically, load up on vitamin C-rich foods like citrus, capsicum and leafy greens; this nutrient helps produce more white blood cells to fight off infections," Laura says. Probiotics from yoghurt, kombucha and kimchi are key to supporting a balanced gut microbiome (after all, the majority of the immune system is housed in the gut). And don't forget to refill your water bottle – hydration is also crucial.

Laura adds that habits make all the difference. "The biggest misconception I see is that people think they can boost their immunity with one food or supplement, but what really matters are your behaviours over time when it comes to following a consistent, balanced eating pattern," she explains.

Finally, we should remember what the pandemic taught us about protecting ourselves and others against illnesses, Dr Li urges. "During surges of the flu, COVID and other infectious diseases, it's always wise to be vigilant about handwashing and to wear an N95 or a KN95 mask if you can't avoid crowds," he says. "We should put all those lessons to good use now."



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YOUR IMMUNITY REFRESHER COURSE

Keep these must-knows in mind as you navigate the sickness season.

COVERING YOUR MOUTH MATTERS Research shows that coughing can spread droplets of germy saliva up to 1.8 metres from the cougher and that pointing the head down while coughing (and covering the mouth) might slow the spread.

DON'T STARVE A FEVER Food is a crucial component of recovering from illness. If you don't have an appetite, focus on eating frequent small portions of immunity-protective picks such as fresh fruit and vegetables and foods that include protein and probiotics.

HANDWASHING BEATS HAND SANITISER Those portable bottles are handy for on-the-go germ elimination, but they don't pack the same punch as a good old scrub at the sink. Even if you use hand sanitiser, wash your hands properly as soon as you find soap and water.

ANTIBIOTICS WON'T FIGHT A VIRUS Bacteria are what antibiotics work against, but many common contagious infections are caused by viruses.

DO THOSE HOME REMEDIES REALLY WORK?

Here's the verdict on a few popular purported cures for colds and flu.

CHICKEN SOUP
This cosy sickness staple is a smart meal choice because it's filled with nourishment in the form of vegetables, protein and spices. Making it with bone broth may boost its get-you-well-soon power, as the bones and other animal parts from which bone broth is made may release more nutrients and amino acids essential for immune function and overall health.

ECHINACEA
The science is mixed. Some studies say this herb can lower your chance of getting a cold or reduce the length of a cold if taken as soon as symptoms develop, but other trials have struggled to replicate these findings.

ELDERBERRY
It's been found in multiple studies that this fruity remedy might reduce symptoms, and even the duration, of the flu, colds and sinus infections. Try a spoonful or a capsule at the first signs that sickness may be imminent.

GREEN TEA
This herbal brew is loaded with antioxidant-rich plant compounds, but black and white teas also offer this healthy benefit, so sip on whatever variety you prefer.

MANUKA HONEY
This New Zealand honey has higher antioxidant activity than traditional honeys and also contains a natural antibacterial agent called methylglyoxal, which can help soothe a sore throat.

VITAMIN C
Consuming this immune-boosting antioxidant via whole foods (rather than supplements) is what nutritionists suggest; this way you get other essential nutrients and the best benefits. One study found taking a vitamin C supplement could reduce the duration of a cold by up to one day – but don't waste your time taking more than the recommended dose, as you'll just wee out what your body can't use.

ZINC
Be cautious with this – it might shorten a cold, but some people experience unpleasant side effects such as nausea when taking zinc supplements. And be mindful of the type of zinc you consume, as most studies show that zinc acetate and zinc gluconate are the kinds that lead to results. P

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