

Sex Helps Prevent the Common Cold

By Michael Castleman

Want to prevent colds and nip early colds in the bud? Then have good sex once a week in a satisfying, long-term relationship. That's what psychologists Carl Charnetski, Ph.D., and Francis Brennan, Jr., Ph.D., of Wilkes-Barre University in Pennsylvania discovered in a study of the healing powers of lovemaking.

Charnetski and Brennan surveyed 111 college students (44 men, 67 women) about their love lives: frequency of partner sex, the length of the relationship, and their satisfaction with it. They categorized sexual frequency as: no sex, infrequent sex (less than once a week), frequent sex (once or twice a week), or very frequent sex (3 or more times a week).

Immunoglobulin A

Then the researchers took saliva samples from the students. Saliva contains an immune-system protein, immunoglobulin A (IgA), the body's first line of defense against the common cold and other respiratory infections. The more IgA you have in your saliva, the less likely you are to catch colds.

The frequent-sex group (once or twice a week) had the highest levels of IgA, and enjoyed the most protection from colds. This group had 30 percent more IgA than the two groups who had less frequent sex and the group that had sex more often—too much of a good thing.

In addition, as length of relationship and satisfaction with it increased, so did IgA level.

Don't Kiss Me. I Have a Cold.

Why would frequent sex in a happy, long-term relationship help prevent colds? At first glance, this seems counterintuitive. After all, colds spread directly from person

to person. The more time you spend in intimate contact with a lover, the more *likely* you should be to catch their colds and spread yours.

However, sex provides two things that enhance immune function enough to override this risk: relaxation and social support.

Many studies show that deep relaxation, the kind that results from meditation or hypnosis/visualization, is a powerful immune stimulant. Psychologists at Washington State University had 65 people watch a video describing the immune system. Then one group did nothing else. Another was taught to meditate, and practiced twice a day for a week. The third learned to visualize their immune systems growing stronger, and practiced that visualization twice a day for week. The researchers then counted the number of infection-fighting white cells in their blood. The control group experienced no increase in white cells. But the meditation and visualization groups did.

Social Support

Other studies show that social support revs up the immune system, and helps prevent colds. At the University of Pittsburgh, psychologist Sheldon Cohen, Ph.D., studied 276 healthy volunteers, who completed a survey of their social ties—to lovers, friends, family, and organizations—and then had live cold virus squirted up their noses. Those with the most social support were least likely to catch the cold.

I Feel a Cold Coming On. Let's Do It.

Which brings us back to the Wilkes-Barre study showing a cold-preventive effect for sex once or twice a week in a satisfying, long-term relationship. Satisfying sex is a deeply relaxing, meditative experience. And having a good long-term relationship provides plenty of social support. Both increase IgA substantially, so both help prevent colds. Although the study involved college students, older adults' immune systems work the same way.

People often say, "Not tonight, dear, I feel a cold coming on." Assuming you're in a good relationship, it's time for an update: "I feel a cold coming on. Let's do it."