

Stay Healthy This Season

By: Justin Freeman Anyone who ski races has had it happen to them. You train hard—intervals, overdistance, everything feels great. Your skis are running great, your confidence is high, and just before the big race, you get sick. Maybe you race anyway and get sicker. Maybe you skip the race and end the season unfulfilled. And maybe you race without consequence—unless you count getting beat by your nemesis by 10 minutes. Everyone gets sick sometimes. And winter, when we race, is when that usually happens. But there are a lot of things you can do to prevent illness and minimize the damage to your season. The number one way to prevent illness is to sleep. Most of the bad colds I got when I was competing at a world class level could be traced directly to several nights in a row of bad sleep. In those seasons where I was able to find the time to sleep well every single night, almost never got sick. Today, with a full time job—and more importantly a toddler to chase after—can't always get the sleep I need. But I have managed to stay pretty healthy by backing off the training when I am way behind on sleep. It is far better to skip the intervals, and sometimes even the entire ski, when you are tired than to risk getting sick.

While colds are probably the most common illness faced by skiers, flu is a serious concern. An important step you can take to prevent this is to get a flu shot. You are probably reading this in December, which is later than ideal but not too late to help.

The next key to staying healthy is to stay hydrated. While you may not sweat as much in the winter (unless your office-mates crank the heat to 74) you still lose a lot of water, particularly through breathing the dry air. Drinking lots of water helps the machine which is your body run much more smoothly at all times. If you are traveling by airplane, if you have extremely dry air—common in hotel rooms—or if you just feel like your nasal passages are drying out, you should use nasal saline. It might feel a little weird to spray salt water into your nose, but it keeps your nasal passages moist and able to fight off germs before they establish themselves.

Speaking of germs, another important way to keep yourself healthy is to wash your hands frequently. Just like your mother told you, every time you go to the bathroom (even if you are a girl and don't pee on your hands), before and after every meal, and basically any time you are near a sink and have a chance, you should wash your hands. You should use plenty of soap and wash long as it takes to hum "Happy Birthday" twice. If the washing dries your hands out, get some lotion. If you can't wash with soap, hand sanitizer helps but what is even more helpful is hand sanitizing wipes; the wipes remove bacteria and viruses in addition to killing them and studies have shown they are much more effective.

Changing clothes is another key to staying healthy. If you are dressed properly to train you will sweat, and driving home in your sticky wet clothing is a big mistake. Always bring at least a warm shirt to change into after your ski. And a hot shower when you get home doesn't just feel good, it helps you stay healthy both by warming your skin and by letting you breathe some moist air.

If you feel you are starting to get sick, all of this advice goes double. Sleep and water help you recover and nasal saline prevents sinus infection. Washing your hands might seem less helpful at this point, but it keeps your friends from getting sick. If you have an important race in the next week

don't ski for longer than it takes to stretch your legs and feel like you have your fresh air for the d

As you start to get sick you will get lots of advice about pills to take. I will try to summarize what I know about your options. Zinc is clinically shown to shorten colds. Zinc is a supplement and so it loosely regulated; there is a slight chance of any supplement triggering a positive drug test (if you are competing at that level) and a larger chance that you simply aren't getting what the label say. Do your homework before picking a product. Vitamin C has a lot more hype going for it than scie but one of the few studies that supports Vitamin C for colds had competitive skiers for its subject. Echinacea is popular but unproven and it is very hard to know what you are getting when you bu

Pharmaceuticals can also keep a cold from getting worse but should be used with caution. Sudafed is a great help to some people (by relieving nasal congestion) but kills others (by raising blood pressure). Guaifenesin (the active ingredient in Mucinex) is very good at thinning mucus, making coughing more effective and helping your sinuses to drain. And Afrin and Benadryl also help relieve congestion, which often prevents a cold from getting worse or spawning a sinus infection. For 90 of the population these drugs are safe; for a few they can be very dangerous. Talk to your doctor about safe cold remedies, and always follow the instructions.

Most important, once you are sick, have patience. You will get better, you will have great days of skiing and fast races, and the best training you can do right now is to lie in bed and drink water.

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