

# 5 Healthy Habits That Are Making You Sick

## ***Too Much of a Good Thing Can Hurt Your Immune System***

*-- By Robin Donovan, Health Writer*

You eat right (most of the time), hit the gym regularly and keep a clean house, especially during cold and flu season. So, why are you still getting sick? It turns out that some of the best things we do to stay healthy can expose us to germs when done wrong, too much or, sometimes, just too frequently. To keep your immune system intact, check out the list below.

### **Catching Up on Sleep**

You might have heard that, despite the temptation to sleep in on the weekends, it's best to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Did you know that too much sleep (and too little sleep, of course) can actually hurt your health?

It's clear that [a regular sleep schedule](#)--one in which you go to bed at the same time each night and wake up at the same time each morning--is effective in promoting long-term health, and preventing changes in your circadian rhythms, or your body's internal clock, that will cause sleeplessness when you return to your normal schedule.

Here's what happens: You're short on sleep all week, then you crash on the weekend, hoping to make up the lost hours. Instead, you find yourself wide awake at your normal, weekday bedtime. You end up losing the hours you'd gained, and then you go right back to a shorter sleep schedule.

Over time, losing sleep takes a toll on your immune system, which can leave you vulnerable to colds, the flu and worse.

### **Exercising**

Aerobic [exercise kick starts the immune system](#), and regular sweat sessions can help you avoid picking up minor ailments. However, increasing your activity level quickly or simply working out too much can put you at risk for the same health problems.

The best training regimens make room for activity and recovery, so be sure to schedule regular periods of rest when you work out. Exercising too frequently or too intensely can temporarily decrease immune system function, leaving you vulnerable to illnesses such as viral infections.

Currently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend 2 1/2 hours of moderate aerobic activity or 1 1/4 hours of strenuous activity a week, along with muscle strengthening exercises twice a week. Check with your doctor if you're thinking of a change in your routine or if you suspect that you might be working too hard when working out.

### **Cutting Calories**

Kudos to those trying to regain a healthy weight by limiting food intake and exercising regularly. However, don't let your zeal for calorie control mean that you don't get [needed nutrients](#). For example, dieting can lead you to skip breakfast, which truly is the most important meal. People who eat breakfast get more nutrients than those who skip it, and those nutrients can lead to a healthier immune system. If you need to cut back on calories, keep your morning meal intact, then space your intake throughout the day.

Crash diets, or those that involve severe food restrictions, can make it harder to get the vitamins and minerals we need to stay healthy. Boost your immunity by counting calories in a healthy, balanced way--and consider asking a nutritionist for help before you begin to cut back.

### **Wiping Down Counters**

It's common sense to [wipe down counters](#) before and after meal preparation or any time you see a build-up of crumbs or other crud. Bathroom and kitchen counters, after all, have been found to be germier than toilet seats.

But before you wipe up that spill, take a close look at what you're using to clean it. If you don't disinfect your sponge or rag regularly, it can end up spreading germs to the very corners you're trying to clean.

If your sponge looks worn or has an unpleasant odor, toss it. Wash dish towels and sponges regularly in a washing machine with hot water and soap, or disinfect a damp sponge by microwaving it on high. You can use bleach to clean a sponge, but be sure to dilute it: Use 1 tablespoon of bleach for each gallon of water.

### Using Hand Sanitizer

Although [hand sanitizers](#) are now more widely used than ever, triclosan-containing products might carry indirect health risks. Antibacterial products that contain alcohol have been shown to reduce the transmission of infectious illnesses, but the FDA reports that there is insufficient evidence that triclosan-laden products have additional germ-killing powers as compared with simple soap and water (or triclosan-free hand sanitizers with alcohol).

Why should you care about avoiding triclosan? Although more research is needed, some studies have raised concerns about triclosan's effects on our health. One example is triclosan's potential link to antibiotic resistance. This basically means that exposure to triclosan kills off weaker bacteria, for example, leaving stronger cells to multiply. This can make bacterial illnesses harder to treat and render existing medications ineffective.

While we wait to see how triclosan might impact people, consider limiting your hand sanitizer use, swapping it out with soap and water or even simply alternating triclosan products with alcohol-based, triclosan-free options.

In any decision to change your healthy habits, weigh your personal situation against the potential risks. So, if you've always been a 9 1/2-hour per night sleeper, perhaps you know your body--and how much sleep it needs. Sickness can be the body's way of telling us that something isn't quite right, however, and if you find yourself unusually sick, check these typical, health-driven habits to stay at your best all year long.

### Sources

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, "[Eat Your Way to Better Health](#)," [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org), accessed on September 23, 2013.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "[How Much Physical Activity Do Adults Need?](#)" [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), accessed on September 23, 2013.

Health Finder, "[Health Tip: A Dirty Sponge Spreads Germs](#)," [healthfinder.gov](http://healthfinder.gov), accessed on September 23, 2013.

MedlinePlus, "[Skipping Breakfast a Recipe for Heart Disease](#)," [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov), accessed on September 23, 2013.

National Eating Disorders Association, "[Compulsive Exercise: Too Much of a Good Thing](#)," [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org), accessed on September 23, 2013.

Rice University, "[Sick and Tired Athletes](#)," [www.rice.edu](http://www.rice.edu), accessed on September 23, 2013.

University of California San Francisco, "[Preventing Osteoarthritis](#)," [www.ucsf.edu](http://www.ucsf.edu), accessed on September 23, 2013.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration, "[Triclosan: What Consumers Should Know](#)," [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov), accessed on September 23, 2013.

Washington State University, "[Study Shows Too Much Exercise Could Be Heart-Rending](#)," [news.wsu.edu](http://news.wsu.edu), accessed on September 23, 2013.

Weight Control Information Network, "[Weight-loss and Nutrition Myths](#)," [win.niddk.nih](http://win.niddk.nih), accessed on September 23, 2013.