

FEDEXING YOURSELF  
TO WORK: BETTER THAN  
THE TUBE

# Don't fall for winter health fads



Want to boost your immune system  
and vitality ahead of 'sniffle season'?  
Dr Chris van Tulleken shows you how

**I**f summer is best summed up by the sight of ice cream, the soundtrack of winter is simply someone blowing their nose.

Persistent sniffles, party season hangovers, general cold weather malaise; we're hurtling towards the time of the year when everyone is either ill or knackered. Sometimes both.

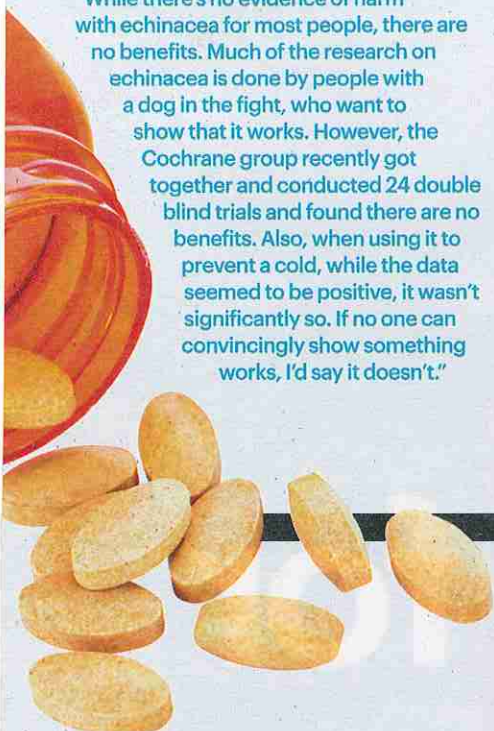
So as your co-workers are felled by sickness or a punishing social schedule, ensure you're not one of them by heeding the advice of TV doctor and infection specialist Chris van Tulleken. Wading through the myths, mistruths and snake oil of modern medicine, we present his nine-step plan to beat the bugs and stay sharp.

You can trust him, he's a doctor. 



## ECHINACEA WON'T HELP YOU

"While there's no evidence of harm with echinacea for most people, there are no benefits. Much of the research on echinacea is done by people with a dog in the fight, who want to show that it works. However, the Cochrane group recently got together and conducted 24 double blind trials and found there are no benefits. Also, when using it to prevent a cold, while the data seemed to be positive, it wasn't significantly so. If no one can convincingly show something works, I'd say it doesn't."



## DON'T FALL FOR MULTIVITAMINS

"The idea of 'Winter's coming, I have to take my multivitamin supplement every day' is really bad thinking. In fact, the whole vitamin and micro-nutrient industry is bad news, really. If you are a well person eating a balanced diet in a first-world country, vitamin supplementation, unless prescribed, can be harmful. And certainly the very best evidence that's been accumulated from places such as Oxford and Harvard – big, big analyses of data – show that multivitamin supplements in healthy people are bad for you. And that has been repeatedly shown."

## DON'T QUIT COFFEE

"The kind of caffeine doses most of us ingest are pretty harmless – it doesn't have any strong effects on the heart and it makes you poo, which is good. We did a piece for the BBC on *Trust Me, I'm A Doctor* where we looked at the biggest dose of caffeine – if you take cold and flu medicine, then filter coffee and then down energy drinks, tea, chocolate.

"We couldn't quite bring ourselves to say there is no unsafe limit for caffeine, but things such as coffee and tea are pretty safe. If you like them, you can enjoy them."



## SLEEP CURES ALL. BUT THERE'S NO 'MAGIC NAP DURATION'

"Get eight hours of sleep a night and you'll feel like Hercules. You'll never get ill.

There is really only one metric I'm interested in: the number of hours you spend asleep in bed. If you find that a product helps you do that, then brilliant, but being woken up in a nice way, by say a sunrise alarm clock, is much less important than the simple quantity of sleep.

"Napping is good for you but there is no magic number for a nap: 17 minutes is not better for you than 28 minutes. Even if you put your head on your desk for five minutes, it is intellectually restorative."

## THINK BEFORE SWIGGING COUGH SYRUP

"There are four drugs to treat colds and flu: paracetamol, ibuprofen, pseudoephedrine and caffeine. You can buy a sachet that will cost you several pounds, but they all just have a mixture of those drugs. Some of it works, which leads us to believe that all of it works. I tend to be quite careful when I talk about flu, as I'm an infection specialist, so flu to me means influenza virus. Most people when they say they have flu probably don't have influenza virus. It's a really basic form of human psychology, which I fall victim to myself.

"If you've got a hacking cough – cough medicine doesn't work any better than honey and lemon. And the good thing is you can drink it all day, whereas cough syrups contain other added ingredients that have a maximum dose."

## DON'T BATHE IN ANTIBAC

"The whole antibacterial product stuff is actually quite poisonous. One of the best ways of getting infections is by touching something and then putting our hands in our mouths, but unless you are literally spraying alcohol on your hand every minute of the day, you're going to be covered in viruses – so what's the point?"

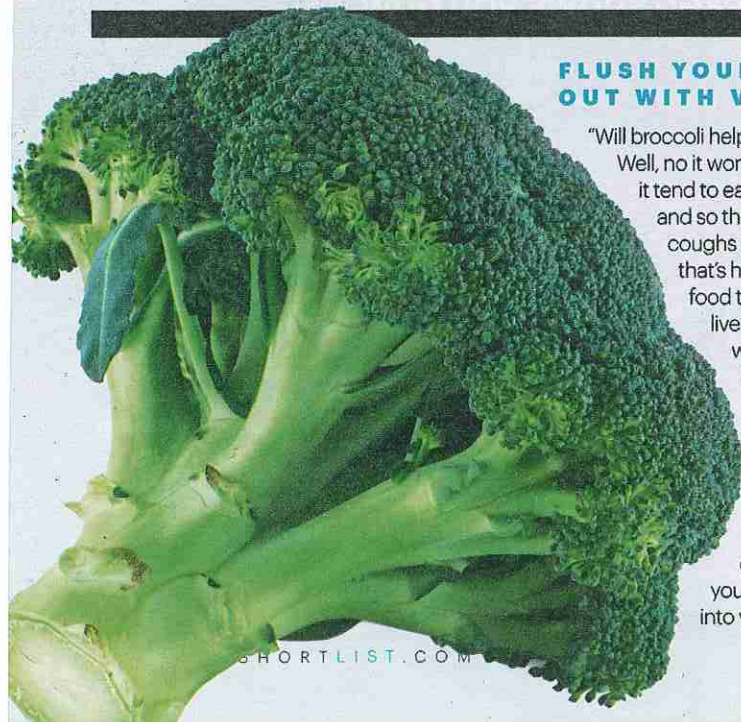
"What you will do with the alcohol spray is eliminate the bacteria that live on your skin and form a very important immune barrier.

"We're covered on the inside and outside by bugs that we need and keep us well, so if you start mucking around with those bugs, you get very ill. I think unless you're a health-care worker, I wouldn't have an alcospray or anything like that. I don't."



## FLUSH YOURSELF OUT WITH VEG

"Will broccoli help your cold go away? Well, no it won't, but people who eat it tend to eat other good things, and so they end up having fewer coughs and colds. Eating a diet that's high in prebiotics, the food the bacteria in your gut live on – green vegetables, whole porridge oats, high-fibre cereals – all this stuff is great for you, as, to be frank, it makes you sh\*t. You get rid of all the crap in your gut, so you don't have half a kilo of fermenting faeces in your bowel, leaking bugs into your immune system."



## FLU JABS: NOT JUST FOR BABIES AND PENSIONERS

"It's well worth getting a flu jab. How about that for boring? It may seem odd, what with the influenza vaccine's association with infants and the very old, but getting a jab is savvier than you might think.

"I caught flu two years in a row and it was dreadful and very nasty. *ShortList* readers are all going to survive flu. It will be a week off work, but you could give it to someone who might not survive. Flu jabs are good news."

Chris van Tulleken is an infection doctor at UCL. He presents *Trust Me, I'm A Doctor*, which continues Wednesdays at 8pm on BBC Two, and the Bafta-winning *Operation Ouch* on CBBC. He can be found tweeting at @DoctorChrisVT