

Key to fighting colds: Bond with your pillow

Fluff up the pillows and pull up the covers. Preventing the common cold may be as easy as getting more sleep. Researchers paid healthy adults \$800 to have cold viruses sprayed up their noses, then wait five days in a hotel to see if they got sick. Habitual eight-hour sleepers were much less likely to get sick than those who slept less than seven hours or slept fitfully.

"The longer you sleep, the better off you are, the less susceptible you are to colds," said lead author Sheldon Cohen, who studies the effects of stress on health at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University. Prior research has suggested that sleep boosts the immune system at the cell level. This is the first study to show small sleep disturbances increasing the risk of getting sick, said Dr. Michael Irwin, who researches immune response at the University of California, Los Angeles, and was not involved in the study.

During the cold season, staying out of range of sneezing co-workers may be impossible. The study in Archives of Internal Medicine mimicked those conditions by exposing participants to a common cold virus – rhinovirus -- and most became infected with it.

But not everyone suffered symptoms. The people who slept less than seven hours a night in the weeks before they were exposed to the virus were three times more likely to catch a cold than those who slept eight hours or more.

Harvard sleep researcher Sat Bir Khalsa said people do not need to turn to prescription sleep aids to improve their sleep. Setting a regular bedtime, moving computers and televisions out of the bedroom and, when restless, getting out of bed for a while and doing something soothing can help.