

# Take Extra Steps for Virus Season

**“Moving Grays Harbor”  
By Maryann Welch**

Well, the chill has definitely been in the air these last few weeks and I'm starting to hear the grumbings around the department of children with sniffles and coughs. It seems almost impossible this time of year to avoid every virus on the Harbor and those of you who have contact with children know that they are great incubators and love to share! I know one reason I cringe at the idea of being sick is that I might miss out on my normal exercise routine. So, I'm ready to take extra steps to increase my chances of getting through the cold and flu season unscathed.

First of all, let me point out that it is **not** cold weather that causes the common cold. The cold weather causes people to congregate together indoors more and makes transmission of viruses much easier. Fall is also the time of year that children are back in school and when they are in close contact in their classrooms or other common areas there is a higher likelihood of contamination.

Working in public health, I know the top two ways to avoid getting sick this season are to get a flu shot and to wash hands thoroughly and frequently. Going in to this time of year with a strong immune system can also be a bonus and regular activity and exercise has been shown to reduce illness in general. In fact, I just read a report of a research study that found people who walked at a brisk pace for 40 minutes 5

days a week had half the number of sick days of those who didn't exercise.

But what should we do as far as exercise or activity is concerned if one of those bugs catches us and we're feeling a bit "under the weather"? Many theories exist about exercising when you have cold symptoms, and for the most part I think that people will self-limit their activities based on their symptoms and what their body is telling them. I know I have a hard time making myself exercise when I feel crummy.

I asked our county's Health Officer, Dr. John Bausher, what his thoughts were on this issue. "Basically, it comes down to common sense and listening to your body" he states. "Many studies have shown that exercising with a cold or cold-like symptoms does not prolong or exacerbate the severity or duration of the common cold. However, exercising with symptoms of fever, nausea, diarrhea or muscle aches can indeed compromise your body's ability to fight the virus you've been exposed to which may result in a longer recovery period."

He further encourages us to consider our symptoms, "if they are above the neck (runny nose, sneezing, scratchy throat, headache) then it is generally safe to continue activity. I would recommend a decrease in intensity for the first few minutes, however. If your symptoms improve after about ten minutes, continue to increase your intensity accordingly. If you feel worse, pack your bag and head for home – channel surfing might be the most intense activity you need today."

Another consideration that we each need to take into account is personal hygiene. If we are exercising in a community environment, how are we protecting ourselves and others

around us from catching a virus? Much has been depicted recently in the media about the “germ trail”. Some germs can stay alive on surfaces for as long as 2 days!

If you go to a gym to exercise you should already know the sanitation procedures for your gym. In general, there should be spray bottles with disinfecting solution and rags that are available for your use before and after you use a piece of equipment. It is common courtesy to clean up after your self and more than that, it just makes good sense.

If you decide that you are not too sick to exercise, think of those around you. Even though a common cold isn't going to hurt us, it sure can be inconvenient. If you are coughing and sneezing, tiny particles of your virus are being spread around the room that you are in. This puts other exercisers at risk for developing the same symptoms you have. Even if you cover your cough with a tissue or cough into the crook of your arm you are still spreading a few germs. Perhaps another solution to exercising while you have a cold is to exercise in the privacy of your own home or to go for a walk or jog out of doors. This way you can protect yourself and others as well.

So, as we approach cold and flu season, resolve to do everything you can to boost that immune system and stay healthy all through the season, listen to your body and pay attention to personal hygiene. Most of all, don't feel guilty if you have to take some time off to recuperate – it will be well deserved.

\*\*This is not meant to replace specific advice from your own doctor. If you are experiencing symptoms that don't seem to be getting better, do seek medical attention.

*Maryann Welch is the director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.*

*If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at [moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us](mailto:moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us) or visit our web site at [www.ghphss.org](http://www.ghphss.org).*