

# Beat any bug

Are you risking life (or maybe limb) with your monthly pedi? Could your cough be more than a cold? Four women stared down the most badass of bugs. Learn from them and stay sick-free all through the germiest season. By Leslie Goldman

## "I will never again skip a flu vaccine."

Lisa Amoruso, 41, stay-at-home mother, Chicago

**Her scare** "I started feeling sick around Halloween last year and figured my body was run-down from lack of sleep and I'd bounce back in a few days. But what started as a simple cold turned into a hacking cough, chronic fever, chills and achiness. My husband urged me to see the doctor. I thought he was overreacting, and I washed down some Advil with a Jamba Juice The Coldbuster. A few days later, I finally gave in when my breathing became so labored, I couldn't walk across the room without needing to rest and catch my breath.

"My doctor checked the oxygen saturation of my blood; if it was low, it could point to a lung infection. Normal oxygen saturation is 95 percent to 100 percent; mine read 80 percent,

so he sent me to the ER across the street where they could monitor my condition. Within an hour, my levels dropped to just 50 percent and I was sent to intensive care, where I spent the next five weeks in a drug-induced coma, hooked up to a breathing machine and on kidney dialysis.

"A lung culture confirmed I had the H1N1 virus, and doctors told my husband I might not survive or could wind up brain-dead. I have no memory of the ICU: When I came to, my husband told me what happened. I couldn't believe it. H1N1 had been all over the news, but I didn't think I'd catch it—and if I did, I figured I'd be strong enough to fight it. Boy, was I wrong.

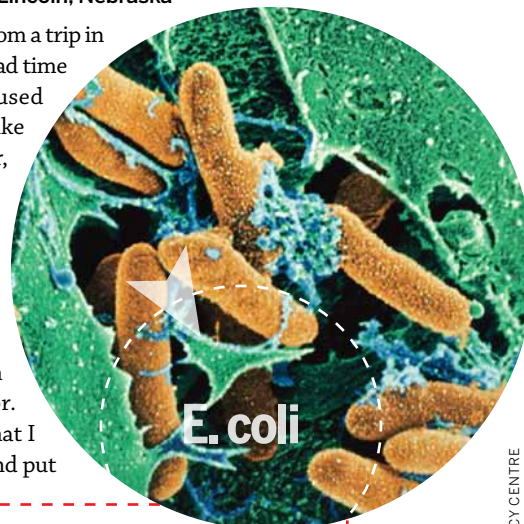
"I spent the next month in rehab to regain muscle function—I couldn't walk after being bedridden so long—and relied on email to communicate while my throat healed from the scraping of the two tubes that had helped me breathe while I was comatose. My immune system had released infection-fighting enzymes into my lungs to battle the illness, which caused scarring and left me with a chronic cough and a lung capacity of only 60 percent. But I'm so grateful to be alive—and I will never again skip a flu vaccine."

**Your solution** This year, the flu vaccine will protect against H1N1 plus two other strains predicted to be this season's main menaces. Everyone older than 6 months, including pregnant women, should get vaccinated without fear. "Millions of doses have been given with no serious adverse events," says Litjen Tan, Ph.D., director of Medicine and Public Health for the American Medical Association. "And the vaccine cannot give you the flu, as the viruses used are dead and inactive. Your getting a shot also helps protect others, including infants and the elderly. Do it for them *and* you."

## "A spinach salad landed me in the hospital for four days."

Kenzi Clark, 26, Ph.D. student, Lincoln, Nebraska

**Her scare** "I had just returned from a trip in late summer 2006 and hadn't had time to go grocery shopping, so I used my roommate's spinach to make myself a salad. Three nights later, I woke up with horrible diarrhea and cramps. Taking a sip of water felt like I was being stabbed in the stomach. After a weekend of pain, vomiting, no food and very little water, I saw blood in the toilet—which scared me into seeing a doctor. I was so severely dehydrated that I was admitted to the hospital and put



## Immunity now! How to stay well this winter

**1 Sweat it out** Workouts spike levels of infection fighters in your immune system. Plus, exercising five or more days a week can lessen your sick days by 43 percent if you do catch a cold or flu.

**2 Dream on** People who snooze for less than seven hours on a nightly basis are three times more likely to succumb to the sniffles than those who snooze for eight or more hours.

**3 Tell a joke** Laughing lowers levels of stress hormones that impair the immune system, says Lee Berk, Dr.P.H., associate professor of allied health professions at Loma Linda University.

**4 Rub it in** A 45-minute Swedish massage can activate important bug-busting immune cells, the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* reports. —Paige Greenfield

on IV antibiotics and fluids for four days. My test results came back positive for E. coli, and an outbreak of the bacteria in bagged spinach was being reported in the local news. I dropped 10 pounds and missed a week of classes and a month of paychecks—I was a waitress and couldn't risk infecting the customers. I love salads, but it took me almost two years to eat spinach again."

**Your solution** Clark's greens were likely tainted with a strain of E. coli from animal excrement that contaminated soil and water on a farm or that spread during shipment. Washing produce is a must and can lower your risk for illness from tainted fruit and vegetables. But it can't wipe out all bacteria, so pay attention to food recalls and reports of food poisoning from public health officials, Tan says. (Follow FoodSafety.gov on Twitter for notices.) Stick to pasteurized milk and juices, and cook meat to an internal temperature of 160 degrees; poultry to 165 degrees. Keep raw meat and poultry separate from produce, which is less likely to be cooked to bug-killing temps. Always (yes, always) wash your hands after touching raw items to avoid spreading bacteria in your kitchen, but avoid antimicrobial soap—it works no better and may strengthen foodborne bugs.

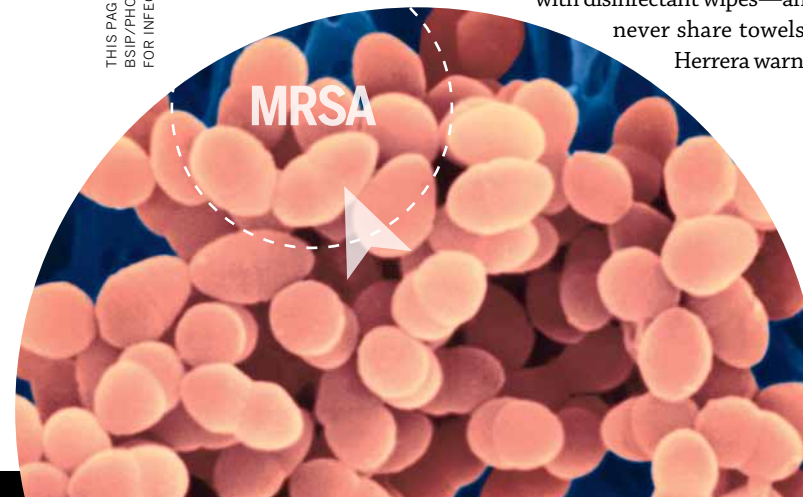
## "A pedicure left me with a potentially deadly skin infection."

Nicole Crabtree, 24, celebrity stylist assistant, Los Angeles

**Her scare** "My sophomore year in college, I went for a mani-pedi at my usual salon. I noticed two red bumps on my leg after showering that night but assumed it was razor burn. When I woke the next day, there were 30 pus-filled bumps all over my right calf, which had swollen to twice its normal size! I freaked out and went to the hospital, where a doctor took a sample of the sores and gave me penicillin for general infection fighting until my lab results came in.

"I was told a few days later that I tested positive for methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), a strain of staph that doesn't respond to common antibiotics such as the one I was on. Staph can live on skin and in our noses and generally causes no harm. But if the skin is broken, the bacteria can gain access to parts of the body they're not supposed to. If the pedicurist touched her nose, then my leg—which was vulnerable from the abrasive scrub she was using—I could have been infected. In fact, my sorority sister was diagnosed with staph after visiting the same spa. And a local woman had just died from a pedi-related staph infection.

"My leg was covered in painful, pitted, purplish marks, and I was terrified I'd be deformed. I wore pants for months until the wounds healed with the help of stronger antibiotics. Thankfully, five years later, I have only a few white scars. Now I do my own pedicures or bring tools with me to the salon." **Your solution** MRSA thrives in warm, damp areas and is most often spread through skin-to-skin contact, which is why open wounds can put you at risk. "Avoid shaving 24 hours before you get a pedi, in case you nick your leg," says Rosa Herrera, a spokeswoman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. "And ensure your nail technician has a license displayed, washes her hands and cleans towels and tools with a disinfectant such as Barbicide." Gym equipment, saunas and hot tubs can also be danger zones. "Clean handrails on treadmills, bikes and weights with disinfectant wipes—and never share towels," Herrera warns.



## "I thought only babies got whooping cough."

Zoey Eaton, 35, Web designer and DJ, Rexburg, Idaho

**Her scare** "Around Christmastime in 2005, my three children—then ages 9, 5 and 4—were sick with a raspy cough. I caught it shortly after and thought, Eh, no big deal. But while my kids got better after a week or two, I was still having sudden hacking spasms three weeks later. I hate going to the doctor and didn't have health insurance, so I put off getting help until my voice gave

## Cold (and flu) comfort

**Congestion** Brew a steamy beverage or bowl of soup: Hot liquids lubricate the airways and loosen mucus in the chest and sinuses, making them easier to expel, says Stacey Tutt Gray, M.D., an otolaryngologist at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary.

**Cough** Opt for over-the-counter meds that contain dextromethorphan; it helps raise the cough threshold in the brain, so you'll be less sensitive to irritants like postnasal drip.

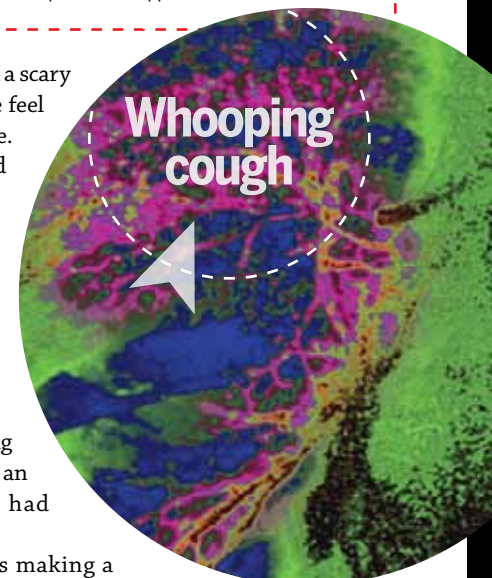
**Sore throat** Gargle with half a teaspoon of salt mixed in 8 ounces of warm water. "The mineral pulls excess fluid away from swollen tissues, reducing inflammation and pain," says Philip Hagen, M.D., editor-in-chief of *Mayo Clinic Book of Home Remedies*.

**Sinus pain** Use a Neti pot. "Nasal rinsing helps break up mucus in the sinus cavity that causes pressure and leaves your head throbbing," Dr. Gray says. Standing over a sink, tilt your head to one side and place the spout of a Neti pot filled with saline water into the top nostril; water and mucus will flow out of the bottom one. Repeat on the opposite side. —P.G.

out a month later and I had a scary coughing fit that made me feel like I was going to suffocate.

"My physician diagnosed me with pertussis, or whooping cough, an infectious bacterial disease that attacks the respiratory system. Antibiotics and an inhaler helped, but the infection lasted two and a half months. No one could believe I had whooping cough. We thought it was an old-school disease that had been cured long ago."

**Your solution** Pertussis is making a comeback in several states, including California, where rates are the highest they've been in 51 years—a crisis experts attribute to inadequate adult immunizations. "Pertussis is the P in that DTaP vaccine you likely received as a child, but immunity wanes over time," Tan says. Left untreated, whooping cough can lead to pneumonia, cracked ribs and abdominal hernias. And it can be deadly to unvaccinated children. "All adults—especially those around infants—should receive a Tdap booster to avoid passing on the infection," Tan advises. ■



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