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Leave the microbes behind

By KAREN UHLENHUTH
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Take it from the experts: You can make yourself less attractive to the microbes out there scouting for their next victim. So whether you're getting ready for a holiday trip (see story on page A-1) or staying put, here are five ways to live right:

1. Wash your hands. "There's no single thing more important to your health than washing your hands," says Dr. Philip M. Tierno Jr., a New York University Medical Center microbiologist who wrote *The Secret Life of Germs*. "If you remember that, you have most infectious diseases conquered."

But there is an art to this.

"The area that everybody touches is the doorknob to the bathroom," said Dr. John Verstraete, who practices medicine with the Plaza Physicians Group.

So wash your hands for 20 or 30 seconds with plenty of warm water and soap, then use a paper towel or wad of tissue to turn off the faucets. Do the same when it comes to opening the bathroom door.

2. De-stress. "I talk to people about this every day," says Nancy Russell, a Kansas City internist. She advises them to exercise, meditate and just chill out. But often, she says, "They don't want to take time to do those things."

So why does stress make you sick?

When a foreign agent, say a virus, invades the body, the body fights back by becoming inflamed -- red, hot and irritated. When the threat has been dealt with, the body's adrenal gland pumps out stress hormones, like cortisol and epinephrine. The hormones are messengers telling the agents of inflammation they can kick back and relax.

The problem for stressed-out people is those hormones are already flowing, and the body doesn't know it's supposed to launch its inflammatory attack. A field day for the virus.

3. Exercise. "We know that after people exercise, the levels of those immune cells are elevated," says Cydney McQueen. She teaches at the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Pharmacy and is assistant director of the school's drug information center. "Is that enough to protect them from anything that comes along? No, but anything's going to help."

4. Eat right. Chris Papasian, a UMKC School of Medicine Immunologist, hasn't been sick for a couple of years. Here's what he eats: lots of fruits and vegetables. Grains and carbohydrates. And vitamins, including B-complex, C, D, E and a multi-vitamin. (He also doesn't drink, smoke or do drugs, he avoids stress, exercises most days and meditates.)

5. Try immune system boosters. The most widely-recommended include Echinacea, garlic, the Chinese

herb astragalus, and Maitake mushrooms. In a test tube, they all have boosted immune cells. The problem, says McQueen, is those results don't necessarily translate in the human body.

Still, take Echinacea at the onset of a cold and you'll feel better in, say five days instead of seven. It won't prevent a cold, however.

And a stir-fry heavy on the garlic and Maitake mushrooms is a fine thing, especially when a cold or flu bug is taking down the office mates.

To reach Karen Uhlenhuth, features reporter for *The Star*, call **(816) 234-4783** or e-mail her at kuhlenhuth@kcstar.com.

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