

The National



Cold comfort

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Finally we can breathe. I expect that's what is going through many people's minds now that the temperate winter is upon us. With the mercury dipping below 30°C and occasional clouds in the sky, we can all take a sigh of relief. Those of us, that is, who haven't succumbed to a cold-related illness. You see for me, the winter has been one non-stop blocked nose, sore throat and fever. Apparently this is the most common time of year to get sick and, as I have discovered, almost everyone has a magic cure.

Normally I take little notice of ancient remedies or superstitious claims regarding health as I am not really prone to falling ill. Prior to my move to the Emirates I had hardly taken enough sick days to count on one hand. Even when I felt slightly under the weather I wouldn't stay at home. My father is a GP and my mother a former nurse, so I have been brought up very much along "put on a brave face" lines.

However in the last year I have struggled to keep illness at bay. Over the spring and early summer I contracted bronchitis and was bedridden with a nasty bout of flu. My parents couldn't believe that, in Abu Dhabi's oppressive heat, I was catching cold, but I was. Then as soon as I got used to the heat, the winter came and my body had to adjust again. Cue a stubborn case of tonsillitis.



Infections and colds affect many people during the UAE winter. Courtesy Rex Features

Many people have their tonsils removed during childhood. When I woke up two weeks ago with a mouth as dry as a desert and feeling like a cactus was lodged in my throat, I sincerely wished I had too. I still don't know what caused it. But more than likely it was just another temperature change that my body wasn't used to. Either way, it was the start of a fortnight of feeling dreadful. My first stop was the pharmacy. I stocked up on vitamin C, Panadol and a load of throat lozenges.

However, this was to no avail. The following day I woke to find my neck swollen from my enlarged tonsils and that I was running a high fever. Swallowing was amazingly painful and I couldn't even get out of bed. I called a generous friend, asked him to drive me to the doctor and sat, in huge amounts of discomfort in the waiting room. Upon examination of my throat the doctor flinched. "Oh dear," he said with a shake of his head. "Bad infection."

"Tell me something I don't know," I thought while quietly nodding.

He prescribed me an extremely strong antibiotic, some medicated lozenges and told me to get plenty of fluid and rest.

I didn't have much choice. The antibiotics wiped me out and I slept for most of the next two days. Emerging from what felt like a coma, I felt much better. The pills had worked, the infection was gone and my temperature was back to normal. I still had a blocked nose but I thought I was over the worst.

Then disaster struck. After the five-day course, the infection came back – with a vengeance. That was when the alternative remedies started rolling in. First I gargled with salt water and lemon every two hours all night long. "It's the wonder formula," promised my friend. "You'll be better by morning."

Needless to say I wasn't. I was just tired and it felt like I had a film of metal caked over my teeth.

As I lay there in bed a colleague rang up and told me to make her mother's secret recipe. An infusion of black peppercorns, cardamom, cloves, cinnamon and fresh ginger all brewed together in a cup of black tea. A messy and spicy trip to the kitchen was all I managed to gain from this suggestion, although I was grateful that she had thought of me.

The next piece of advice came from a contact who rang to talk about work and ended up trying to get me back to good health. He swore by garlic and lots of it. Following his instructions I crushed up five whole cloves, put them in a cup, mixed them with a few spoonfuls of yoghurt and gulped the medicine down.

It was disgusting. The garlic burnt on my tongue and I felt like the yoghurt would curdle in my stomach but, amazingly a few hours later I did start to feel better. Only marginally, though.

The next day I woke up, over a week into my sickness, at the end of my tether. That's when help came in the form of an ancient form of Indian medicine called ayurveda.

A friend recommended it as the magic cure for anything, so I went along to Sharinis Wellness Spa in Khalifa City and booked myself in for an appointment with Dr Dhaniya.

She sat me down and for about an hour, asked me a variety of strange questions ranging from my childhood diseases to how I would react if I saw an accident occur. From this comprehensive interview she assessed the levels of air, fire and water in my body and diagnosed me accordingly.

Ayurveda is based on the doctrine that these three elements form the entire universe and therefore the human body. By assessing my metabolism, digestion, temperament and general health, Dhaniya told me that I had too much water and not enough fire – hence the increased levels of phlegm and the lack of antibodies to kill the infection.

She suggested a diet of only hot foods, nothing cold, not even salad was allowed. I was also to stay away from toxins such as tobacco and to avoid dairy products. If I went out in the evenings I had to block my ears with cotton wool. Pineapple and papaya were also recommended to build up my fire level.

Immediately she treated me with a facial massage to loosen up my sinuses and some hot-oil treatment in my nasal passage which trickled down to my throat. This was to expel some of the infection.

I started to feel the difference immediately. However, ayurveda is not a fast-working technique. Unlike pharmaceutical medicine, the doctrine works on building a healthy metabolic system, attaining good digestion and proper excretions. Therefore I returned to the clinic for a week of follow-up treatments during which time my throat infection had become a thing of the past.

Now, for the first time this winter I can breathe. I can appreciate the cool evenings and I no longer have to walk around with cotton wool in my ears. One thing I have learnt from my journey back to the land of the living is the truth in the adage: if at first you don't succeed, try and try again.

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