



# The Downsides of Dampness

After the sizzling dry season, the first rain showers are a welcoming respite, but with the cooling wet weather come illnesses. Giselle Whiteaker speaks to a panel of doctors about staying healthy when wet

**A**s the rain starts, so do the runny noses, coughing fits and chances of getting mosquito-borne diseases. What do the experts have to say about this phenomenon? The doctors of Ho Chi Minh City are in agreement that rhinoviruses and dengue, among others, are more common during the rainy season.

Dr Mark Sieftring, from Stamford Medical Centre, suggests that, given the lack of conclusive evidence for why respiratory viral infections are more common during the rainy season in the tropics, the reasons may have more to do with our behaviour in response to the changes in weather.

"When it becomes cold or rainy," explains Dr Sieftring, "we are more likely to stay indoors in more crowded environments." This closeness allows for easier transmission of germs.

Evidence suggests bacteria and viruses become more active in humid conditions. The cold virus can survive longer outside the body in humidity. We've all seen slow motion images of sneeze droplets hanging in the air. It seems logical that the denser the air, the longer the particles are airborne. Given that one way to catch a cold is by inhaling infected droplets, the longer they're in the air, the more chance there is of inhalation.

Victoria Healthcare International's Dr Suresh Rangarajan also sees increased rates of the enterovirus that causes hand-foot-mouth disease, an illness common in children. Despite the similar name, it is completely unrelated to foot and mouth disease.

"This time is difficult for patients and physicians," he says, "as many of these viruses are present similarly with low grade fever, congestion, runny nose and cough, and we do

not have accurate tests for them".

Dengue increases are easier to explain. The fever is spread by the Aedes mosquito, a day-feeding mozzie that breeds in standing water. When is there more standing water? Yes, you guessed it, the rainy season. Mosquitoes breed in flowerpots, puddles and city sewers, then go hang out in your house. They don't even have the courtesy to die after biting, like bees after a sting, but instead go around infecting multiple victims.

## ● REDUCE YOUR CHANCES

So what can we do to reduce the chances of getting these diseases? The obvious starting point is hygiene. The doctors are in agreement that regular hand washing throughout the day can reduce the transmission of bacteria. Dr Maria Arulnayagam, from FV Hospital, recommends getting some fresh air flow through your home, by opening windows. She cites keeping hydrated as armour too. And if you're thinking about quitting smoking but need some additional motivation, you might like to know that the respiratory damage caused by smoking increases the severity of cold and flu symptoms.

Dr Rangarajan suggests cleaning dirty surfaces and soiled items, such as toys, first with soap and water, and then disinfecting with a solution of chlorine bleach. This can be made by adding 1 tablespoon of bleach to 4 cups of water. He also points out that there is a growing body of evidence that moderately intense cardiovascular exercise on a regular basis can help in the prevention of seasonal colds. Even if it is no help in cold prevention, at least you'll be fit.

Dr Sieftring also makes an important point about work and illness. "Missing work