



wasn't considered as much before things like SARS and Avian Influenza came into our global consciousness. We often toughed it out and rolled into work as dutiful employees." A well-known advertising campaign based on this idea was for a leading brand of cold and flu tablets, with the slogan "Soldier on". Cold and flu tablets mask the symptoms, so you can 'soldier on' at work. The problem is that you are probably infectious and passing it on to your colleagues.

How about wearing surgical masks? It depends who is doing the wearing. If the infected person is covering up, there are some benefits. By coughing and sneezing into the mask, the transmission of the disease is limited. The same effect can be achieved by covering your mouth with your hand, although Dr Siefring advocates coughing into the side of your arm. Or better still, into a tissue. Essentially, if you are healthy and hoping to stay that way by wearing a mask, you can forget it. Surgical masks are not designed to prevent the inhalation of airborne particles, and so provide little protection,

according to the most recent study on masks by D. F. Johnson et al.

#### ○ GET THE SHOT

The jury is unanimous on flu shots as one of the best forms of prevention. Dr Siefring, Dr Rangarajan and Dr Arulnayagam all recommend an annual flu shot, but remember, last year's flu shot will not protect you against this year's flu. This is particularly important for at risk groups such as the young and the elderly, and anyone with a lung condition, such as asthma or emphysema.

To avoid dengue, you need to avoid mosquitoes. Get a copy of *The Word's* April issue and read our article on mosquitoes for some serious tactics, but in brief, wear mosquito repellent, cover up, and get rid of all standing water around the home. There is currently no vaccine for dengue.

Finally, a healthy diet can help boost your immune system, although there have been mixed results in the studies on the effectiveness of different vitamins. Vitamin C is commonly linked to cold prevention, as is

zinc, although medical evidence supporting this yields inconclusive results. There are studies that show that both vitamins may help reduce the length of a cold. Foods high in zinc include liver, spinach, beef and pumpkin seeds. For Vitamin C try oranges, peaches, strawberries, broccoli or peppers. Dr Arulnayagam also recommends selenium as a good booster for the immune system. Food containing selenium includes cereals such as corn, wheat and rice, Brazil nuts and walnuts, soybeans, chicken and tuna. According to UpToDate Online, Echinacea is the most frequently used botanical in the United States, yet studies have failed to demonstrate any beneficial effects in the treatment of colds. Vitamins D and E, garlic and ginseng get an occasional mention, but again there are no conclusive studies.

So much for all of those old wives' tales. Seems the only way vitamins can help is as part of a generally healthy eating plan. So grab an apple on your way to the gym and keep your fingers crossed for a healthy rainy season. 