

How to Boost your Immune System

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The idea of improving your immunity is tempting but for many reasons, the ability to do so has proven elusive. This is exactly what the immune system is — a network, not a single entity. This requires equilibrium and harmony to work well. There is still much that researchers don't know about the intricacies and interconnectedness of the immune response. For now, there are no scientifically proven direct links between lifestyle and enhanced immune function.

Your first line of defence is to choose a healthy lifestyle. The one best action you can take to keep your immune system strong and safe naturally is to follow general good-health guidelines. Every part of your body, including your immune system, functions better when protected from environmental threats and strengthened by these healthy-living strategies;

- Stopping smoking
- Eat a diet high in fruits and vegetables.
- Participating in a moderate exercise that you enjoy
- Getting sunshine and fresh air where possible
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- If you drink alcohol, drink only in moderation.
- Get adequate sleep.
- Take steps to avoid infection, such as washing your hands frequently and cooking meats thoroughly.

Some experts think that taking a multivitamin daily will help ensure that you meet at least your daily minimum requirement for some nutrients. Vitamins essential to immune function include vitamins A, C, D and E. Zinc, selenium and magnesium are minerals the immune system requires to work in the best way possible. These minerals are also critical for the function of many enzyme reactions in the body. Your immune system and body can't function at their best without the basic building blocks they need to work properly.

Antioxidants are compounds that guard against free radicals in colourful fruits and vegetables. Free radicals can damage components of DNA and other cells. A wide range of colourful fruit and vegetables have the perfect combination of defensive antioxidants to improve optimal health and immunity. Eat leafy greens, watermelon, carrots, berries, broccoli, oranges, kiwi, cantaloupe, and other brightly coloured produce to give your cells and immune system all the natural protection they need to function at their best. Homemade chicken soup with carrots, celery, and other veggies can also be a boon to your immune system.

A lack of sleep also makes you vulnerable to viruses and bacteria, meaning you might be more prone to catch a cold or flu when you're sleep-deprived. Several studies confirm the link between sleep and a

healthy immune system. Most people need between 7 to 9 hours to feel adequately rested. Being well-rested improves the function of white blood cells, so you're less likely to get illnesses like respiratory infections, colds, and the flu. Practice good sleep hygiene to optimize sleep. That means waking up and going to bed at the same time every day, even on weekends. Avoid substances that can interfere with sleep, like caffeine and alcohol, for several hours before bedtime. You're more likely to sleep well if your bedroom is cooler. Establish a relaxing evening routine before bedtime. As noted in a recent study from the Sleep Foundation, "Without sufficient sleep, your body makes fewer cytokines, a type of protein that targets infection and inflammation, effectively creating an immune response. Cytokines are both produced and released during sleep, causing a double whammy if you skimp on shut-eye. Chronic sleep loss even makes the flu vaccine less effective by reducing your body's ability to respond."

Consequently, the study advises taking two 30-minute-or-less daily naps to help mitigate sleep deprivation's effects on the immune system. But if you're having a difficult time getting to sleep, you can try the many binaural beats found on YouTube (Jody Hatton's Power Naps is a good place to start) to help grab some winks on your coffee break.

Exercise also has numerous health benefits including protecting you against heart disease, osteoporosis, and even certain types of cancer. Exercise is also an immune booster. To reap maximum benefits, try to be moderately physically active for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week. Walking is one of the simplest ways to exercise. If you're not excited about walking, try yoga, swimming, cycling, or golf. Gardening is also a good way to get some outdoor activity.

Some herbs may help ward off viruses and bacteria. Some research has suggested that compounds in herbs and supplements can enhance immunity. Garlic, astragalus, milk thistle, ginseng, green tea, black cumin, and liquorice are just a few herbs that have been reported to have immune-boosting benefits. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before including herbs and supplements into your regimen. They may produce side effects, especially when combined with other herbs, supplements, or medications. Probiotics are beneficial strains of bacteria that have also been described as immune boosters. Look for probiotic supplements with lactobacillus and bifid bacterium. Probiotics can also help improve digestive health.

If you think citrus fruits have the most vitamin C of any fruit or vegetable, think again. Ounce for ounce, red bell peppers contain twice as much vitamin C as citrus. They're also a rich source of beta carotene. Besides boosting your immune system, vitamin C may help maintain healthy skin. Beta carotene helps keep your eyes and skin healthy.

A 2014 randomized controlled trial did find that people who took a garlic supplement had fewer colds and recovered more quickly from colds than people who didn't take garlic. Garlic is found in almost every cuisine in the world. It adds a little zing to food and it's a must-have for your health. Early civilizations recognized its value in fighting infections. According to the National Centre for Complementary and Integrative Health Trusted Source, garlic may also help lower blood pressure and slow down hardening of the arteries. Garlic's immune-boosting properties seem to come from a heavy concentration of sulphur-containing compounds.

Both green and black teas are packed with flavonoids, a type of antioxidant. Where green tea excels is in its levels of epigallocatechin gallate, or EGCG, another powerful antioxidant. EGCG has been shown to enhance immune function. The fermentation process black tea goes through destroys a lot of the EGCG. Green tea, on the other hand, is steamed and not fermented, so the EGCG is preserved.

Most people turn to vitamin C after they've caught a cold. That's because it helps build up your immune system. Vitamin C is thought to increase the production of white blood cells. These are key to fighting infections. Popular citrus fruits include: oranges, grapes, lemons, lime

There's a strong link between your immune health and your mental health. "When you're under chronic stress or anxiety, your body produces stress hormones that suppress your immune system," Moyad says. Research done at Carnegie Mellon University has found that people who are stressed are more susceptible to developing the common cold.

In one study, published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 276 healthy adults were exposed to the cold virus, then monitored in quarantine for five days. Those who were stressed were more likely to produce cytokines, molecules that trigger inflammation, and were about twice as likely to get sick. Also, people who are stressed are less likely to pay attention to other healthy habits, like eating right and getting enough sleep, which can affect immunity, Lin adds.

Although you can't avoid stress in your life, you can adopt strategies to help you manage it better. A 2012 study, published in Annals of Internal Medicine, looked at adults 50 and older and found that those who either did a daily exercise routine or performed mindfulness meditation were less likely to get sick with a respiratory infection than subjects in a control group, and if they did get sick, they missed fewer days of work.

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