

15 Ways to Boost Your Immunity

Along with Chinese herbal medicine, certain dietary and lifestyle modifications can increase the immune systems ability to fight off colds, the flu and other illnesses.

Exercise: Exercise not only helps your immune system fight off simple bacterial and viral infections, but it decreases the incidence of illnesses like heart disease, osteoporosis and cancer. How does exercise cause a boost in your immune system? First, physical activity may help by flushing bacteria out from the lungs (decreasing the chance of a cold, flu or other airborne illness) and may flush out carcinogens (cancer-causing cells) by increasing waste output like urine and sweat. Another possible reason is that exercise is responsible for sending antibodies and white blood cells (the body's defense cells) through the body at a faster rate. As these antibodies or white blood cells circulate more rapidly, they could detect illnesses earlier than they might normally. The increased rate of circulating blood may also trigger the release of hormones that 'warn' immune cells of intruding bacteria or viruses. Also, the temporary elevation of body temperature may inhibit bacterial growth, allowing the body to fight the infection more effectively. (This is similar to what happens when the body has a fever.) Finally, exercise slows down the release of stress-related hormones. Stress increases the chance of illness (see below), so physical activity could reverse this factor. While all this is good news for those who already exercise, one must not overdo physical activity. People who already exercise regularly are cautioned not to develop too vigorous a workout program in the hopes of increasing the immunity benefits. Heavy, long-term exercise (such as marathon running and intense gym training) could actually decrease the amount of white blood cells circulating through the body and increase the presence of stress-related hormones. Exercise can help us feel better about ourselves, just by making us feel more energetic and healthier.

Healthy Diet: Adequately feeding your immune system boosts its fighting power. Nobody can eat whatever they wish and remain entirely healthy. According to TCM, most food a person eats should be cooked because cooked foods are easier to digest. To ensure optimal health, a person should eat a wide variety of whole foods with a high percentage of vegetables, fruits, grains and complex carbohydrates, and also smaller amounts of meats, eggs and dairy products.

Specific foods boost the immune system and immune boosters work in many ways. They increase the number of white cells in the immune system and/or increase their ability to fight better. They also help eliminate the substances that drag the body down. Here are the top eight nutrients to add to your diet to cut down on days missed from work and school because of illness:

Vitamin C: Vitamin C tops the list of immune boosters. There has been more research about the immune-boosting effects of Vitamin C than perhaps any other nutrient. Vitamin C is available naturally in many fruits and vegetables. It increases the production of infection-fighting, white blood cells and antibodies and increases levels of interferon, the antibody that coats cell surfaces, which prevents the entry of viruses. You don't have to take in massive amounts of vitamin C to boost your immune system. Around 200 milligrams a day is a generally agreed-upon amount. This can be obtained by eating at least six servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

Vitamin E: This important antioxidant and immune booster doesn't get as much press as vitamin C, but is important to a healthy immune system. Vitamin E stimulates the production of natural killer cells, those that seek out and destroy germs and cancer cells. It enhances the production of B-cells, the immune cells that produce antibodies that destroy bacteria. Vitamin E supplementation may also reverse some of the decline in immune response commonly seen in aging. It's not difficult to get 30 to 60 milligrams every day of Vitamin E from a diet rich in seeds, vegetable oils, and grains.

Carotenoids: Beta carotene increases the number of infection-fighting cells, natural killer cells, and helper T-cells. It is also a powerful antioxidant that mops up excess free radicals that accelerate aging. Beta carotene is the most familiar carotenoid, but is only one member of a large family. Researchers believe that it is not just beta carotene that produces all these good effects, but all the carotenoids working together. This is why getting carotenoids in food may be more protective than taking beta carotene supplements. The body converts beta carotene to vitamin A, which itself has anticancer properties and immune-boosting functions. But too much vitamin A can be toxic to the body, so it's better to get extra beta carotene from foods and let the body naturally regulate how much of this precursor is converted to the immune-fighting vitamin A.

Bioflavonoids: A group of phytonutrients called bioflavonoids aids the immune system by protecting the cells of the body against environmental

pollutants. Bioflavonoids protect the cell membranes against pollutants trying to attach to them. Along the membrane of each cell are microscopic parking spaces, called receptor sites. Pollutants, toxins or germs park here and gradually eat their way into the membrane of the cell, but when bioflavonoids fill up these parking spots there is no room for toxins. A diet that contains a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, at least six servings per day, will help you get the bioflavonoids needed to help your immune system work in top form.

Zinc: This valuable mineral increases the production of white blood cells that fight infection and helps them fight more aggressively. Zinc increases the number of infection-fighting T-cells, especially in elderly people who are often deficient in zinc, and whose immune system often weakens with age. The anti-infection hype around zinc is controversial. While some studies claim that zinc supplements in the form of lozenges can lower the incidence and severity of infections, other studies have failed to show this correlation. A word of caution: too much zinc in the form of supplements (more than 75 milligrams a day) can inhibit immune function. It's safest to stick to getting zinc from your diet and aim for 15 to 25 milligrams a day. For infants and children, there is some evidence that dietary zinc supplements may reduce the incidence of acute respiratory infections, but this is controversial. Foods that have a rich source of zinc include zinc-fortified cereals, oysters, crab, beef, turkey meat (dark) and beans.

Garlic: This flavoured member of the onion family is a powerful immune booster that stimulates the multiplication of infection-fighting white cells, boosts natural killer-cell activity, and increases the efficiency of antibody production. The immune-boosting properties of garlic seem to be due to its sulfur-containing compounds like allicin and sulfides. Garlic can also act as an antioxidant that reduces the build-up of free radicals in the bloodstream.

Selenium: This mineral increases natural killer cells and mobilizes cancer-fighting cells. Best food sources of selenium are tuna, red snapper, lobster, shrimp, whole grains, vegetables (depending on the selenium content of the soil they're grown in), brown rice, egg yolks, cottage cheese, chicken (white meat), sunflower seeds, garlic, Brazil nuts, and lamb chops.

Omega-3 fatty acids: A study found that children taking a half teaspoon of flax oil a day experienced fewer and less severe respiratory infections and fewer days of being absent from school than other children. The omega 3 fatty acids in flax oil and fatty fish (such as salmon, tuna, and mackerel) act as immune boosters by increasing the activity of phagocytes, the white blood

cells that eat up bacteria. Essential fatty acids also protect the body against damage from over-reactions to infection. When taking essential fatty acid supplements, such as flax or fish oils, take additional vitamin E, which acts together with essential fatty acids to boost the immune system. One way to get more omega-3 fatty acids in your diet is to add one to three teaspoons of flax oil to a fruit and yogurt smoothie.

Just Relax: Excessive stress lowers a person's immune system, thereby increasing that individual's susceptibility to influenza, colds and other diseases.

Decreasing sugar: Eating or drinking 100 grams (8 tbsp.) of sugar, the equivalent of one 12-ounce can of soda, can reduce the ability of white blood cells to kill germs by 40%. The immune-suppressing effect of sugar starts less than thirty minutes after ingestion and may last for five hours. In contrast, the ingestion of complex carbohydrates, or starches, has no effect on the immune system.

Avoid antibiotics: The more an individual uses antibiotics the more likely they are to get sick more often, with longer, more stubborn infections caused by resistant organisms.

Proper Sleep: Research shows that not enough sleep leads to more colds and flus. A study in the September 25, 2002 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association showed that the flu vaccine was only half as effective in individuals who were sleep-deprived.

Lose some weight: Obesity can lead to a depressed immune system. It can affect the ability of white blood cells to multiply, produce antibodies, and rush to the site of an infection.

Stop smoking: Smoking increases your susceptibility (and that of people around you) to various illnesses.

Avoid alcohol: Excessive alcohol intake can harm the body's immune system in two ways. First, it produces an overall nutritional deficiency, depriving the body of valuable immune-boosting nutrients. Second, alcohol, like sugar, consumed in excess can reduce the ability of white cells to kill germs.

Breastfeed your child: Breast milk is known to protect against gastrointestinal tract infections, otitis media, invasive Haemophilus influenza type b infection, RSV infection and other causes of upper and lower respiratory tract infections - even years after the breastfeeding is done. Children who are not breastfed average five times the number of ear infections as do those who are breastfed.

Avoid dehydration: Drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol, drugs, coffee and smoking because all of these dehydrate the body.

Fresh Air: Get outside for some fresh air every day. Use HEPA Air Filters in your home and workplace. HEPA filters can remove 99.97%+ of the pollen, dust, animal dander, and even bacteria from the air. Plants can also be excellent air purifiers.

Eliminate Food allergens: Due to a genetic quirk, some divisions of the immune system recognize an otherwise harmless substance (such as milk) as a foreign invader and attack it, causing an allergic reaction. Before the battle, the intestinal lining was like a wall impenetrable to foreign invaders. After many encounters with food allergens, the wall is damaged, enabling invaders and other potentially toxic substances in food to get into the bloodstream and hamper the immune function of the body. This condition is known as the leaky gut syndrome.

Enroll your child in a nursery with fewer children: Using a daycare that has six or fewer than six children dramatically decreases the germ exposure (and illness), especially in winter months.

Wash your hands: We all know that hand washing is a good idea. Research in daycares has demonstrated that when children and their providers wash their hands at key moments, the results are spectacular. The most important times are after nose wiping, after diapering or toileting, before meals and before food preparation. Instant hand sanitizers can also be used and are sometimes more convenient. These use alcohol to physically destroy germs and, because they are anti-septic, are preferred to antibiotic soap. Germs can develop a resistance to antibiotic soap.