Food is Medicine

5 ways to build a stronger immune system

The role of our immune system is to fight back against illnesses and 'bugs' (bacteria and viruses). Unfortunately, some common behaviors that we may already be engaging in can block the immune system's ability to do its job. Read on for 5 steps that you can take to stay healthy and strong.

1. Get enough sleep

Making sure that we get a good night's sleep, consistently, is one the best ways our immune system defends us against viruses and diseases. Sleep plays a major role in improving our body's ability to fight off disease and infection. Specifically, studies have shown that sleep has the potential to enhance the ability of the immune cells to respond better against sickness. Aim to get between 7 to 8 hours of sleep each night.
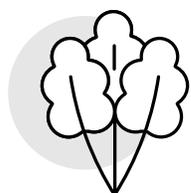
2. Eat your veggies (and other plant-based foods)

A diet that nourishes your health may improve and maintain a strong immune system. Just like our cars, if we maintain them regularly and fill up their tank with the right type of fuel they will drive well and breakdown less. Although there is no single food that bolsters our immune system per se, studies indicate that micronutrient deficiencies (not eating foods that are filled with quality nutrients) can lead to certain infections and diseases.

Filling our plates with whole, minimally processed, plant-based foods such as whole grains, vegetables, fruits, beans, nuts, and seeds may improve our immune function. Plants are full of nutrients that not only help us stay well day-to-day but also act as one of the best defenders to keep chronic diseases at bay. Individuals with chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and cancer are even more susceptible to attacks from viruses. So make every meal count!

3. Lower stress

A little bit of stress is actually beneficial to our health. In fact, the "appropriate amount" of stress increases alertness and performance. Furthermore, researchers are finding that stress stimulates the growth of stem cells and can improve memory. However, these days, most of us have too much stress which can compromise our immunity.

So how do we know how much is too much? It largely depends on the individual, but good stress is when you are feeling "resilient and confident" and managing challenges. But as soon as you feel overwhelmed - that's an indication that you're juggling too much and that amount (and type) of stress could be impacting your immunity. Some of the ways that you can reduce stress are to seek support from your friends and family, exercise, delegate or ask for help, and find ways to relax and have fun!

4. Exercise regularly and keep moving.

Healthy lifestyle factors, like exercise, improve cardiovascular health, lower blood pressure, help with weight control, and reduce stress. Although more research is needed to find a direct link between exercise and immunity, exercise or movement is vital to maintaining optimal health. Contrary to prior held beliefs where rigorous exercise was thought to suppress our immune system, studies are now finding that strenuous exercise is beneficial for immune health.
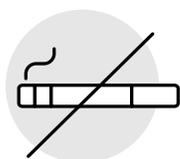
5. Don't smoke.

An analysis of deaths from coronavirus in China found that the risk of disease progression including death was 14 times higher among those with a history of smoking, as compared to non-smokers. For those who smoke (including vaping), the adverse effects of flu and other infections become much more serious.

Smoking increases the risk of respiratory complications from coronavirus (which is similar to flu but ten times deadlier) since the lungs are compromised from nicotine and other chemicals. Smoking also lowers immunity. Not smoking or vaping, and avoiding secondhand exposure lowers the risk of serious complications from coronavirus and other diseases.

The bottom line is that focusing on what you can do is more beneficial than focusing on things that are out of your control (which may lead to even more stress!). We hope that you will use some of these tips to stay healthy and well.

> **"The best and most efficient pharmacy is within your own system."**
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> Robert C. Peale