



7 Common Sense Tips for Optimizing Your Immune System

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Keeping yourself healthy and free from diseases is the role of your immune system. Immunity is the body's ability to use its natural defenses, through a body-wide, organized system of specialized cells, tissues, and organs. Proper Immune function is influenced by many factors, some of them modifiable (such as diet and physical activity) and others that are not (such as increasing age, or the presence of underlying medical conditions).

To promote optimal immunity, consider the following lifestyle strategies:

1. **Don't smoke.** Smoking harms the immune system and can make the body less successful at fighting disease. Additionally, smoking increases the risk for several immune and autoimmune disorders (conditions caused when the immune system mistakenly attacks the body's healthy cells and tissues).
2. **Follow a healthful, balanced eating plan every day.** Among the nutrients well recognized for playing an important role in building immunity are **protein and zinc** (found in foods such as lean meats, poultry, eggs, fish, seafood, soy and beans), **Vitamins C and A** (many fruits and vegetables, particularly citrus and orange-colored fruits/vegetables), and **Vitamin E** (nuts, seeds, and vegetable oils). Others, including **Vitamin B6, Vitamin D, folate, selenium, iron, and copper** may also play a role. Make sure to include a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, reduced-fat dairy, and lean protein foods in your daily meal plan. Limit added sugars, unhealthy fats, and excess calories. Aim for a healthy weight. If you are unable to obtain adequate nutrition from your diet alone, talk to your doctor about the need to take a daily multivitamin/mineral supplement.
3. **Exercise regularly.** Regular physical activity promotes overall good health, including heart health, lower blood pressure, healthy body weight, and protection against several chronic diseases like diabetes and cancer. Strive for at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity each week, including both cardiovascular and strength-building types.
4. **If you drink alcohol, drink only in moderation.** Excess alcohol consumption can weaken the immune system, and make the body more susceptible to respiratory infections such as pneumonia. Too much alcohol can result in liver disease and disruption of the normal



bacteria in the gut. Moderation is defined as one drink per day for women and no more than two drinks per day for men.

5. **Get adequate sleep.** Studies show that people who do not get enough quality sleep are more likely to get sick after being exposed to a virus, and take longer to recover. This may be related to the reduction in protective proteins (cytokines) normally released by the immune system during sleep. Long-term sleep deficiency can also increase your risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Set up a healthy nightly sleep routine (control caffeine before bedtime, shut off cell phones and other screens), and aim for 7-8 hours of sleep nightly for adults (9-10 hours/night for children).
6. **Reduce and manage chronic stress in your life.** Stress that is persistent and poorly managed (leading to excessive worrying, depression, or anxiety) can result in abnormally high levels of the hormone cortisol. Cortisol normally regulates both the inflammatory and immune response in the body, but under chronic stress levels, tissue sensitivity to cortisol decreases, and immune response declines. Practice stress-reducing techniques such as meditation, yoga, or music relaxation, and seek professional help if symptoms persist.
7. **Take steps to avoid/limit infection** by seasonal bacteria and viruses, though proper hand washing, cough/sneeze etiquette, effective cleaning/disinfection of objects and surfaces, and avoiding close contact with sick people, if possible.



For more information, please visit:

CDC Preventing CoVid19 Spread Communities: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/index.html>

Harvard Health Publishing/Harvard Medical School:
<https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/how-to-boost-your-immune-system>

USDA ChooseMyPlate <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/>

Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans 2nd Edition: https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/Physical_Activity_Guidelines_2nd_edition.pdf

CDC Tobacco Use: https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/sgr/50th-anniversary/pdfs/fs_smoking_overall_health_508.pdf

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<http://www.co.hunterdon.nj.us/rutgers/fcs.htm>

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