



# ways to **BOOST YOUR IMMUNITY**

Ramp up your body's germ-fighting capability with these tips. Whether it's an everyday cold or a more serious illness, being sick is atop nobody's to-do list

by **LISA BAIN**

**FIRST THINGS FIRST:** While these moves won't prevent or cure COVID-19, building up your body's defenses is one of the best ways to keep yourself as healthy as possible overall. "It's particularly important right now to maintain your immune system so that your body is better able to fight viruses," says Neha Vyas, M.D.,

a family medicine specialist at the Cleveland Clinic and an assistant clinical professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. As always, wash your hands frequently for at least 20 seconds, and take extra care if your immune system is compromised because of illness or a medication you take.

## Prioritize sleep.

When you skimp on zzz's, research shows that you're more likely to become ill after being exposed to a virus. While you sleep, your immune system releases chemicals your body needs in order to fight off an infection. Deprive yourself of rest and your body may produce fewer of these chemicals. So, how much sleep does the average adult need? Seven to eight hours, experts say. And younger folks need even more: Teens should get nine to 10, and kids in elementary school need 10-plus hours, ideally.

## Move your body.

Get out and take a walk if you can; if you're stuck inside, put on some music and dance. Studies suggest that moderate physical activity may decrease the rates of infection for viruses, including the flu and pneumonia, and bacterial diseases. "Exercise helps you maintain a healthy weight, produces 'feel-good chemicals' and makes it easier to get a good night's sleep," says Dr. Vyas. There's also more and more evidence that getting regular exercise has an anti-inflammatory effect on the body and also enhances immune function. (Inflammation when you're injured or infected is part of the body's healing process, but too much can actually lead to disease.)

## Try to chill out.

Seems like a tall order these days, but that's exactly why it's key: When you're under stress, your body lowers activation of less immediately essential bodily functions such as the immune response. "Over time, increased stress ups your body's production of cortisol, which can lower your body's white cell count," explains Dr. Vyas. Fewer

white blood cells—the immune system's superheroes—means a weakened immune response. To counter chronic stress, Dr. Vyas suggests meditation and self-reflection, such as journaling. Or try this instant way to relax: Set a timer for one minute, then simply breathe in, counting to four, and breathe out, counting to four.

## Get some vitamin C.

This vitamin—a powerful antioxidant—seems to have a beneficial impact on the immune system, research shows, by enhancing immune cell functions (see below for some great vitamin C-containing foods). And some research indicates that a healthy diet with lots of plant-based foods may help as well. But that doesn't mean you should chug supplements to get your C or other nutrients. "It's always safer—and tastier!—to get your vitamins from a food source rather than from supplements," which can be a backup, says Dr. Vyas. "The recommended daily allowance of vitamin C is 75 to 90 mg per day. People who smoke should try to get more."

## Watch the booze.

It's best for your immune system to avoid drinking excessively, says Dr. Vyas. Chronic alcohol use significantly weakens our defense system, per a review of studies in *Alcohol Research*. For one thing, it messes with the function of immune cells in the upper airways, which may explain why drinking has been linked to various lung diseases. And binge drinking may make it harder to recover from physical trauma. If you drink, cap it at one drink a day, which is considered moderate for women, according to CDC guidelines.



## Don't Jump On the Bandwagon

These products are popular for their supposed immunity benefits, but evidence is limited or controversial.

### VITAMIN DRINK MIXES

Some vitamin C is helpful, but a large amount (there are products that contain over 1,000% of your RDA) has not been proven to give any extra protection, says Kirsten Hokeness, Ph.D., an immunology expert at Bryant University.

### COLLOIDAL SILVER

When taken in excess, this supplement can turn your skin, eyes and internal organs permanently Smurf blue. Ingesting large doses of silver particles can also increase your risk of seizures and kidney damage.

### NOSODES

Some homeopathic practitioners incorrectly believe these small sugar pellets containing highly diluted pathogens drawn from blood, urine or pus are an alternative to vaccinations.

### ECHINACEA AND GARLIC

Garlic seems to boost immunity in lab animals, says Hokeness, but you'd probably have to eat a huge amount to see any benefit. As for echinacea, there are so many variables in species and preparation that you cannot rely upon what's on the shelf.

—Adele Jackson-Gibson

## Q: Can you suggest foods to help fight infections?

I'm getting this question a lot these days! Here's what the research shows.



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### Probiotic foods:

Yogurt, sauerkraut and other fermented foods support good bacteria in your gut, home to most of your immune system. These beneficial microorganisms can boost natural antibodies, which help fight infection.



### Protein:

Chickpeas, beans, lentils, peas and other legumes, plus lean animal protein sources, help build and repair tissues that support a healthy immune system. Meat, shellfish and legumes supply zinc, a mineral that helps heal wounds.



### Fruits and veggies:

Citrus, strawberries, sweet potatoes, red bell peppers and other fruits and veggies that contain vitamins C and A can protect the integrity of immune cells. Bonus: The fiber in these supports gut bacteria.



### Nuts,

including almonds, hazelnuts, peanuts and nut butters, contain vitamin E, which is an antioxidant that research suggests can help protect the body against several infectious diseases.



### Water

is vital to every cell in your body, including immune cells. It is also essential for flushing toxins out of your system. Start with an extra two cups of water a day and build up. Soup counts; skip sugary fruit juices.