

Strengthen Your Immune System

The viruses that cause colds and flu are spread from person-to-person, making them very easy to contract. That is why it is important to have a strong immune system. “By taking a few simple preventative measures, you can help build immunity to a variety of cold and flu viruses,” says Verena Van Fleet, PhD, associate professor at Northwestern Health Sciences University.

Dr. Van Fleet, in collaboration with Sher Demeter, LAc, clinic operations assistant for the Minnesota College of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (MCAOM) at Northwestern; and Peggy Miller, LAc, manager of the herbal pharmacy for MCAOM, offers these tips for boosting your immune system:

Exercise Consistently:

- Moderate exercise keeps blood and energy flowing, which increases circulation and function. “Don’t be sedentary during the week and then exercise hard on the weekends,” says Dr. Van Fleet. “This can damage your immune system and make you more susceptible to getting a respiratory infection.” Miller recommends trying tai chi or qi gong, which are gentle yet effective exercises.

Eat Well:

- “Excellent nutrition is the backbone of maintaining good health and a strong immune response throughout the year,” says Demeter. “During cold and flu season, you should increase your consumption of warming foods, such as soups and teas, and decrease your consumption of cold and raw foods.”
- Get an adequate amount of Vitamins. More specifically, Dr. Van Fleet recommends:
 - *Vitamin C*: Found in fruits, broccoli, and brussels sprouts.
 - *Vitamin A*: Found in orange and red veggies such as carrots and greens such as kale. Also found in meat, fish, eggs, milk and other dairy products.
 - *Vitamin D*: Found in egg yolk, cod liver oil and other sources of omega-3 fatty acids. Milk and other dairy products are often fortified with it. Small amounts of vitamin D are produced when you are exposed to the sun (although exposure to the sun should be in moderation). This may help explain why people tend to get sick more often during the winter (when there is less daylight and people are less likely to be outside).

Reduce/Manage Stress:

- “Both Eastern and Western traditions recognize unresolved stress as a factor that weakens the body,” says Demeter. “Stress can be brought on by emotional upset, poor diet, lack of sleep and other environmental stressors.” Stress can be debilitating, using energy that should be directed to maintain and repair the immune system. When you are stressed, your body doesn’t have enough energy to maintain and repair your immune system.

Dress Appropriately:

- “Be sure to keep your neck and throat warm and out of the wind,” says Miller. “In Chinese medicine, certain pathogens are thought to enter the body through the back of the neck and throat – so it’s especially important to wear a scarf when you’re outside.”

Gradually Expose Yourself to Pathogens:

- If you live in an environment that’s too clean, your immune system will become idle. Not being exposed to viruses on a regular basis, may subject your body to conditions like asthma or allergies,” says Dr. Van Fleet. “Your body will channel function towards things that aren’t pathogens (such as allergies) that normally wouldn’t make you sick. Having a cold or flu keeps your immune system alert.”

Live a Moderate Life:

- Don’t drink too much [alcohol] or eat too many sweets – it can have a major effect on your immune function. Try not to do anything in excess.

Hydration is Key:

- Dehydration affects your skin and mucus membranes which are the first line of defense in preventing pathogens from entering your body. If your mucus membranes are dried out, it can create a problem. They are responsible for flushing out your system. Pathogens can easily attach to cells and get into your body. This is especially important during exercise.

Wash Your Hands:

- Washing your hands frequently and thoroughly can help prevent you from getting sick and also keep you from spreading your germs to others when you are sick. You should always wash your hands before you eat.

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