

Immune System Boosters for Increased Overall Health

Our body's immune system has to be functioning well in order to maintain health. It is like an army of soldiers fighting off foreign invaders such as bacteria, fungus, viruses etc. Our everyday lives can serve to strengthen this army and allow it to work smarter or drag it down and make us more susceptible to illness.

The most important thing you can do is to get adequate sleep. The body cannot perform all of its restorative functions in less than 7 hours, so I would say that 7-9 hrs is optimal. A big part of these restorative functions involves the immune system and brain function, which explains why people who regularly get less than 7 hours a night usually have more frequent illness, impaired memory and concentration skills, especially when driving.

Managing stress levels is also crucial. Daily chronic stress increases cortisol and adrenaline levels in the body which interferes with sleep, increases appetite for simple carbohydrates (desserts, bread, pasta etc) and causes weight gain around the middle. It also impairs our army of soldiers which makes us vulnerable to illness. Engaging in mild to moderate exercise, playing an enjoyable sport or doing yoga has been shown to reduce the body's reaction to stress and improve sleep and immune function.

There are also many foods and supplements you can take to boost immune function as part of a general health regimen.

Vitamin D- This amazing substance isn't actually a vitamin at all. It is our body's "master hormone" and there are Vitamin D receptors all over the body. An ideal blood level is between 60-70 ng/ml (25-vitamin D which is the form circulating in the blood). Vitamin D is a regulator of the immune system and a level of at least 40ng/ml is required for it to function at a basic level.

Scientists at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine did a study involving 3,000 volunteers and found that a shocking 90% were below the normal range of 40-60 ng/ml required for general health. I recommend for everyone to get their "number" and raise their levels to the ideal range of 60-70ng/ml by taking Vitamin D3 (natural form). It is impossible to get all that you need from your diet so this is the one area I recommend supplements over diet. Controlled, safe sun exposure for 15 mins/day in the summer months is also useful.

Having an ideal Vitamin D level also has been shown to drastically reduce your chances of many diseases including cancer, MS, diabetes etc. Dr. Hollick, M.D./PhD wrote a wonderful book called "The Vitamin D Solution" which should be recommended reading for all.

Probiotics- These “good bacteria” increase the health of our guts which in turn make our entire bodies healthier, including our immune system. Bifidobacterium found in yoghurt such as Activia and probiotic supplements from your pharmacy, has been shown to enhance NK cells and neutrophil activities (markers of the immune system). Having this in your diet daily goes a long way to protecting you from illness and is crucial if you take antibiotics regularly. If you eat chicken, you are more than likely on antibiotics because of the overuse of such substances on chicken farms. This is a growing issue of concern and can be avoided by buying from local farmers or organic varieties from your grocery store.

Garlic- The Journal of Nutrition (Mar 2001) reports that garlic stimulates the immune system by activating lymphocytes, macrophages, cytokines and natural killer T-cells. This all amounts to a much stronger immune system. The recommended dose is 1 clove/day. Try to encourage everyone in the room to have some as well to avoid any garlic breath worries. If you really don't like the after effects, odour free garlic supplements can be purchased at your pharmacy.

Mushrooms- Research on mushrooms and immunity mainly focus on beta-glucans which is part of the soluble fibre in mushrooms. A study of the immune modulating properties of mushrooms (C Lull et al, Mediators of Inflammation 2005) found that they stimulate different parts of the immune system including T and B cells, macrophages and natural killer T-cells.

Mushrooms contain selenium which is an antioxidant, anti-cancer and potent immune stimulator. The best mushrooms to choose are Shiitake, Maitake, Oyster, Portobello and porcini.

Lastly, eating an anti-inflammatory diet (see my other articles) is extremely important to maintaining a healthy immune system. Inflammation is a silent killer that will definitely drag down the army of soldiers that we all rely on to live a life of energy and vitality.

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