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Immune-Boosting Lifestyle

After a month of holiday parties, shopping, and busy schedules, one morning you awaken to a stuffy nose, scratchy throat, and overall fatigue. What can you do to protect and strengthen your immune system to combat such illnesses?

What is the immune system?

The immune system is the body's defense system, a complex network of cells and tissues that block or destroy harmful substances, such as bacteria, viruses, and fungi. While fighting against invading microorganisms, your immune system protects your healthy cells. The first line of defense includes the skin and mucous membranes which act as physical barriers to unwanted microorganisms. Proteins and other cells throughout the body serve as signaling molecules, attackers, and scavengers that recognize and destroy invaders.

Can lifestyle changes strengthen my immune system?

Healthy lifestyle habits can protect and even enhance your immune system. A wholesome diet with a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, and lean protein sources provides the nutrients and antioxidants needed for a healthy immune system. Regular aerobic exercise, such as 20-30 minutes of brisk walking daily, can contribute to a healthy immune response. Lastly, relaxation strategies such as yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises can reduce the stress in your life and strengthen the immune system.

What are some specific ways to include immune-boosting nutrients in my diet?

Malnutrition weakens the body's immune response and leads to increased risk of infection, particularly among children, hospitalized patients, and elderly adults. The best dietary strategy for a healthy mind, body, and immune system is to consume a variety of unprocessed, nutrient-packed foods. Some nutrients with well-known roles in immunity and their major food sources include:

- Vitamin A/beta-carotene – antioxidant that maintains healthy skin and membranes
 - Dark green leafy and deep yellow/orange vegetables and fruits; dairy products
- Vitamin C – antioxidant that maintains connective tissue
 - Fruits & vegetables, such as oranges, strawberries, kiwi, bell peppers, broccoli
- Vitamin E – antioxidant that maintains cell membranes
 - Vegetable oils
- Zinc – trace mineral involved in many processes (e.g., immune reactions & wound healing)
 - Whole grains, fish, lean meat

While you can obtain all the necessary nutrients from whole foods, a multivitamin/mineral supplement with no more than 100% of the RDA may be suggested for persons with diets that do not meet the recommended dietary guidelines.