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## 12 Immune-Boosting Habits You Should Pick Up From Doctors

By: Jenn Sinrich | September 9, 2020

Most of us try our very best to live a healthy lifestyle. We eat well, exercise, aim to get enough sleep, and avoid smoking or drinking too much alcohol. There's one important thing all of these habits have in common: They all help bolster our immune system.

What is our immune system, really? It's our body's defense mechanism against harmful invaders—i.e. stress, inflammation, bacteria, and, of course, diseases, including viruses. That last one is super important, especially now, as the coronavirus continues to sweep across the United States and the rest of the world. And with flu season upon us, there's no better time to make sure your immune system is in fighting condition.

So, what you can do in addition to the healthy habits already stated above? We asked top doctors what they're doing to keep their immune system strong this season. Read on for 12 immune-boosting habits you should pick up from doctors.

### Get moving

With Americans spending more time cooped up at home and little-to-no access to a local gym, exercise may not be top of mind for many. But staying active is important, perhaps now more than ever. "Exercise helps improve circulation in the body that allows the cells and substances of the immune system to flow efficiently," explains Natasha Trentacosta, MD, sports medicine specialist and orthopedic surgeon at Cedars-Sinai Kerlan-Jobe Institute in Los Angeles. She recommends sneaking in a brisk, 30-minute walk at least once (or twice) a day or doing a virtual fitness class from home.

### Stick to an 8-10 hour feeding window



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Commonly called time-restricted feeding or intermittent fasting, this means sticking to an 8-10 hour window of eating every day and consuming zero calories outside of that window, explains **Elroy Vojdani MD, IFMCP, and founder of Regenera Medical**. “Studies suggest that time restricted feeding can increase the amount of immune cells in the body and increase the repair of damaged precancerous cells, as well as fight against diabetes or insulin resistance, potentially extending lifespan and healthspan simultaneously,” he says. The easiest way to do this? Delay or skip breakfast and then continue to eat normally throughout the day, stopping after an early dinner.

### Reduce your consumption of sugar (and booze)

Both sugar and alcohol are inflammatory to the immune system, explains Dr. Vojdani, so by reducing your consumption, you’re allowing your immune system to reduce the amount of inflammatory signals it sends to the rest of the body. “Eating whole foods that are organic when possible will also increase the amount of plant-based immune boosting compounds to your system, which can also help produce a strong and balanced immune system,” he adds.

### Wash your hands

Most of us do this on the regular—or, at least more so now in lieu of COVID. “Many viruses and bacteria are transmitted by our dirty hands touching the mucosal membranes that line our mouths, eyes, and nose,” says orthodontist Heather Kunen, DDS, MS, co-founder of Beam Street. “Washing with actual soap, instead of hand sanitizer, is ideal because it takes away the bad pathogens and preserves the healthy flora that keep us healthy.”

### Meditate

There is so much research to support the mind and body benefits of meditating. But did you know that meditating has a beneficial impact on your immune function? “Research suggests that regularly engaging in mindful meditation can increase the amount or balance of T lymphocytes, a vital type of white blood cells, in the blood,” says Dr. Vojdani. If you’re unsure of how to get started with your meditation practice, consider downloading one of the many meditation apps, including Headspace, Calm, or 10 Percent Happier.

### Brush and floss daily

Chances are, you know to do this daily. But you may not have realized that doing so, in addition to seeing a dentist regularly for an exam and checkup, is important to keeping your immune system in check. “The oral cavity is a potential gateway to bacteria and viruses entering into your body,” says Rhonda Kalasho, DDS, a dentist in Los Angeles. In addition to practicing effective oral hygiene habits, she reminds patients the importance of washing their hands and keeping their fingers out of their mouths.

### Optimize your vitamin D levels

There’s a lot of concern over Americans getting too little vitamin D while sheltering in place, which is why Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, an internist who specializes in fibromyalgia and pain, emphasizes the importance of getting outside. “While proper social distancing, masks, and other precautions are important, realize that it is quite okay to go outside for walks in the sunshine,” he says. “Numerous other studies are showing the importance of vitamin D in decreasing the severity of the virus.”



### Sleep in

Are you getting the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep each night? If you're not, consider this your wake up call. "Your brain has a lymphatic system that drains while you sleep, which helps keep your body maintained and your immune system functioning properly," says Jessica Peatross, MD, Internist and Functional Medicine Leader. If you're having trouble sleeping or lack energy most days, she recommends making an appointment with your primary care provider to rule out any underlying conditions.

### Take supplements

Beverly Hills-based plastic surgeon and skincare expert, Dr. Christopher Zoumalan, relies on supplements to keep his immune system in high-working order. "I take Probiotics, which are 'good' bacteria that line our digestive tracts and support our body's ability to absorb nutrients and fight infection," he says. "Given all the processed foods we eat, probiotics help promote a healthy environment in the gut."

He's also a fan of ashwagandha, an herbal supplement that has been shown to help boost the immune system, mental health, energy, help reduce stress, and even increase male fertility. Turmeric is another one of his go-tos. "It is a very effective anti-inflammatory herb that is an incredible wound healer and powerful immune system booster," he says.

### Drink alkaline water to balance your body's pH

"When we are stressed or under the weather, our body's alkalinity can shift from alkaline to more acidic, paving the way for inflammation and disease," explains Olivia Audrey, ND. In addition to drinking plenty of regular water throughout the day (instead of sodas or sugary juices), she recommends drinking a naturally-sourced alkaline water such as Eternal. Sourced from volcanic springs, it can help return our bodies to a more alkaline, acid free state.

### Stay social

The impact of maintaining social distance is not a positive one for most. In fact, one study published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry found feelings of loneliness to be as dangerous to the body as smoking 15 cigarettes/day. "Several studies indicate clear links between our social networks and our feelings of social connections with immune function," says Scott Kaiser, MD, family medicine physician and geriatrician at Providence Saint John's Health Center in Santa Monica, California. "Maintaining meaningful connections with others—friends, family members, colleagues, neighbors—is an often overlooked part of good mental and physical health."

### Maintain a strong sense of purpose

Having something that drives you and motivates you to wake up each morning is important and can have a profound influence on your health and well-being. "Several fascinating studies have linked regular volunteer activity with healthy immune function, along with a whole host of other components of good health," says Dr. Kaiser. "So next time you go to the doctor, perhaps they'll get out their prescription pad and recommend that you go volunteer in that mentorship program!"

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