

Wellness Rx: “The Immune System”

FACTS:

- Our immune system is an **integrated system** of biological structures (skin, thymus gland (T Cells), tonsils, bone marrow (releases white blood cells) & lymphatic system) and processes within an organism (digestion, gene expression, cell growth, detoxification) that **protects us against disease-causing microorganisms or germs** (bacteria, viruses, parasites, fungi) and chronic illness.
- When the immune system fights a real infection for the first time, it creates “memory cells”. If you are ever infected by that germ again, the memory cells recognize it and initiate a rapid attack on it.
- **Close to 70% of the body’s immune system dwells in the gut or digestive tract.**
- Many experts believe that **most diseases** are caused or **aided** by uncontrolled microbes and parasites in the body (excessive use of antibiotics, steroidal or cancer drugs causes the most damage to our natural intestinal bacteria). A **weakened immune system** allows these microbes and parasites to invade the blood and internal organs and we become susceptible to frequent infections, autoimmune diseases, inflammatory disease, **allergies**, diabetes, heart disease, asthma, migraines, depression, sinusitis, fibromyalgia and cancer.
- Researchers are still trying to understand how the immune system works & how to correctly interpret measurements of immune function. It’s complicated since **everyone’s immune system is unique** and impacted by genetics. Each person’s physiology responds to stress, micronutrient deficiencies and active substances (i.e. drugs and herbal products) differently.
- Experts do agree that one’s **lifestyle** strongly affects the immune system. While exercising regularly, maintain a healthy weight, drinking in moderation, no smoking, controlling blood pressure, managing stress is important, one’s efforts to **avoid infection** (i.e. washing hands frequently), eating a **diet** high in fruits, vegetables & whole grains (low in saturated fat, processed foods & raw sugar) and getting **adequate sleep** is essential. **Sleep deprivation**, in particular, can lead to higher levels of a stress hormone, more inflammation in the body and organ productivity since our bodies produce hormones & enzymes these while we sleep.

- Researchers now believe that the **aging process** leads to a reduction of immune response capability and that the **elderly are far more likely to contract infectious disease, especially respiratory infections.**
- While all experts agree that helping to prevent ones immune system from “**breaking-down**” is critical, the idea of “**boosting**” one’s immune system with foods, supplements or natural products remains **without evidence-based research to many in traditional medicine.** In Chinese medicine, immune stimulation is regarded as one of the best strategies to improve the body’s defense mechanism especially in elderly people or individuals with cancer.
- As a unique system that requires “balance and harmony” to function most effectively, the strengthening of one’s immune system can best be achieved holistically or by **impacting as many organs and health systems as possible.** This includes the liver to improve detoxification and the flushing out of toxins, the adrenal glands to maintain hormonal balance, internal cleansing of the colon to reduce build-up and removal of toxins and parasites, reduction of body inflammation and correction of identified nutritional deficiencies.
- Individuals, in particular, who are **prone to sickness** and are experiencing a life challenge such as job change, financial problems or divorce, live in a high risk area (environmental issues; Lyme Disease, etc.), work within a germ infested area such as a hospital or a high risk country or who are traveling by plane. The **elderly** should especially take precautions to **strengthen and maintain their immune systems.**
- **Vaccines** are one of the most important medical technologies ever developed. A vaccine prompts your immune system to build immunity against a particular germ. Each specific vaccine contains a recognizable but harmless version of the germ. When you’re vaccinated, your immune system responds by making antibodies and memory cells, but without making you sick. In the case of the **annual flu vaccination** for example, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) tries to create a vaccine that combines all of the viruses that are most likely to cause flu that year.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM:

- Concentrate first on maintaining **daily hydration**, getting adequate sleep, understanding the level of stress in your life, adopting health-living strategies and your **diet. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables** of different colors (avoid fast foods, snack foods, candy or soda) to increase your levels of antioxidants or foods that help protect your cells from free radicals (molecules that can damage cells). Avoid **heavy food consumption** since it can make your immune system work harder.

Look to add the following foods or supplements to your weekly diet:

1. If you need a daily multi-vitamin rich in minerals, take it and consider adding **2,000 mg. of vitamin C, 2,000 IU's of Vitamin D3 & 400 IU's of Vitamin E.**
2. Vegetables such as kale, broccoli, lettuce & cabbage are foods that support the liver and improve detoxification. Fermented vegetables like **sauerkraut are particularly powerful and mushroom extracts** are loaded with the antioxidant ergothioneine. According to Dr. Oz, foods and supplements derived from the **Larch plant** are showing promising results
3. **Raw honey** is a natural antibiotic & antifungal and helps with inflammation.
4. **Avocados** supports adrenal function and hormonal balance.
5. **Garlic** in any form has infection-fighting capability.
6. **High dose probiotics** (such as Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium) helps to maintain good bacteria in your digestive tract. However, the quality of probiotic products can be unreliable. One product that is especially safe and effective is the refrigerated brand **Florajen (15 billion live capsules per capsule). Probiotics are most effective on an empty stomach and are safe for children.**
7. **Oregano oil** helps to cleanse the gut and remove bad bacteria. In dosage form, use 200mg. three times daily.

For individuals interested in enhanced natural products:

1. **Elderberries:** Considered as a **fast-acting immune booster** that has been relied on for centuries as a safe and powerful healer for all ages. The berries are **anti-viral**, anti-inflammatory, anti-infective, anti-oxidant and anti-cancer. Their ability to kill all type of viruses is especially valuable to help **inactivate flu or influenza viruses**, respiratory viruses and to destroy **herpes virus**, which causes cold sores. Elderberries are exceptionally rich in anthocyanin's (antioxidants) which aid and nourish the immune system and protect all cells against viral infections. Also, there is scientific evidence that phytochemicals in elder flowers help reduce swelling in mucous membranes, such as the sinuses. One Hudson Valley grown product (Town of Olive) that has proven highly effective is **Elderberry Cold & Flu Tonic by Rosy Bone Knob** (one ounce daily for adults; ½ ounce daily for ages 2-12). **A six ounce bottle of the tonic costs \$15.**
2. **Mushroom Tinctures:** Relied on for centuries to **stimulate the immune system**, to reduce body inflammation and for their **anti-viral properties**. Most tinctures consist of **Chaga, Reishi or Maitake mushrooms**. The formulation of tinctures is a slow process which requires the soaking of the mushrooms to extract their healing properties. That's why

tincture administration is more effective than just eating raw mushrooms. Studies suggest that “**polysaccharides** from mushrooms enhance the immune system by stimulating natural killer (NK) cells, T cells, B cells and macrophages- dependent cells.” Mushroom tinctures are **not fast-acting immune boosters** and are most effective as part of plan to strengthen and maintain ones immune system especially if dealing with a chronic illness. One Hudson Valley company (Big Indian) that produces excellent mushroom tinctures is **MycoCulture Design**. Their Chaga Tincture harvests the mushrooms growing in live birch trees. **A two ounce bottle of the tincture costs \$30.**

3. **Milk Thistle:** Protects the liver from free radicals (toxins and pollutants) and stimulates production of new liver cells.
4. **Isotonic OPC-3:** High in **antioxidants** and contains bilberry, grape seed, red wine extract & a form of Pycnogenol. The all-natural liquid vitamin is absorbed quickly into the blood stream as a daily supplement and the company has high standards for quality control.
5. **Aromatherapy:** An approach that obtains aromatic, essential oils from herbs and flowers and assigns them as therapeutic treatments. An antibacterial blend of **Clove, Lemon, Cinnamon Bark, Eucalyptus and Rosemary oils** appear to have a very high kill rate against airborne micro-organisms, especially viruses and antibiotic-resistant germs.
6. **Homeopathy:** A therapeutic method that uses highly diluted natural substances to relieve symptoms. The concept behind homeopathic medicine is to stimulate our body’s natural resources to heal itself. All products are highly safe for all ages and they do not interact with other medications or supplements. When taken at the first sign of flu-like symptoms, **Oscilloccinum** quick-dissolving pellets (under the tongue), can help reduce the duration and the severity of the virus-producing illness.
7. **Ayurvedic Remedies** (medicines of India): Consist of herbal combinations such as **Turmeric, Ginger and Garlic** added to rice or raw honey and **cinnamon** used at the first sign of a cold and then every couple of hours for 48 hours.
8. Other natural products that are used or promoted as “immune stimulators” include Aloe Vera, Astragalus membranes, Echinacea, Asian Ginseng and Glycyrrhiza glabra (licorice root).

Other more aggressive techniques to improve the functioning of the immune system include:

1. **Acupuncture:** Used for thousands of years to prevent, diagnose and treat disease. Used alone or as part of a balanced treatment plan that may include herbal therapy. Acupuncture boosts immune system activity. According to the National Institutes of

Health, acupuncture is now highly recommended as an additive to conventional therapy for the **treatment of cancer**.

- 2. Intestinal Cleansing:** A process designed to help re-establish a healthy intestinal flora to the body. Since 70% of our immune system lies in the gut, a healthy intestinal tract is essential to boosting immune system activity and overall energy. There's many techniques used for intestinal cleansing that include herbal tonics and capsules, enema kits, colonic irrigation and intestinal sanitation. Some techniques use **microbicides** like raw garlic or hydrogen peroxide to kill pathogenic microbes or wormwood, gum turpentine or essential oils to kill intestinal parasites and **laxatives** like coffee, psyllium, Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate), castor oil, senna, sea salts or goat soap to clear out the colon. Some techniques are recommended daily, weekly or monthly. Most techniques recommend introducing **probiotics with lactobacilli** to the diet after each flush to prevent unwanted germs to grow back to full strength after the next meal. Many experts now also say that **prebiotics** or the food that we provide for our intestinal flora may be even more important than the probiotics that we can take as supplements. These nutrients determine which microbial species will thrive and which ones will not do well. For example, the easily digestible carbohydrates from sugar and grain products favor Candida and other yeasts production, the indigestible fiber FOS helps stimulate beneficial intestinal bacteria and **inulin** power helps to stimulate the growth of bifidobacteria in the colon.
- 3. Systemic Antimicrobial Therapy:** Involves cleaning the bloodstream, lymph fluid, and internal organs of pathogenic microbes. Some of the remedies used in this therapy include the strong fungicides **iodine and borax**, olive leaf extract, wormwood, gum turpentine, hydrogen peroxide, coconut oil, extract of Neem leaves, cinnamon, eucalyptus, mustard, oregano, thyme and lavender oil.

Intestinal Cleansing and Systemic Antimicrobial Therapy can be challenging. It is highly recommended that one seeks advice from a professional in the field before implementing treatment.

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