

HEALTH NOTES by Evelyn Ames Topic: “Nurturing” Your Immune System

“I am at this moment Deaf in the ears, Hoarse in the throat, Red in the nose, Green in the gills, Damp in the eyes, Twitchy in the joints, and Fractious in temper from a most intolerable and oppressive cold.”
Charles Dickens

Now that the cold and flu season is upon us, it's time to nurture and maintain a healthy immune system. The immune system (comprised of skin, mucous membranes, white blood cells, lymphatic vessels, tonsils, adenoids, thymus, spleen, lymph nodes, appendix, parts of small intestine, and bone marrow) is crucial in maintaining health. “People talk about boosting immunity as if it were a task similar to building muscles or reducing blood cholesterol. Hundreds of ads for supplements and other products promise to boost immunity. But keeping your immune system in good shape is a complicated task. “How do I boost immunity?” is really the same question as “What can I do to stay well?” (Berkeley Wellness Letter).

Do “special foods” boost the system? Fact: an adequate diet that includes proteins, fatty acids, vitamins, and minerals maintains health. Any food promoted as “special” or “miracle” only adds money to the promoter's pocket. “Dietary supplements’ used to make you think only of vitamins and minerals. Today, this big business makes and sells many different types of dietary supplements that have vitamins, minerals, fiber, amino acids, herbs, or hormones in them. Supplements come in the form of pills, capsules, powders, gel tabs, extracts, or liquids. Sometimes you find them added to drinks or energy bars” (Administration on Aging Age Page).

Do supplements boost your immunity? Fact: research does not show that supplements boost immunity in healthy people. People who are malnourished or who don't efficiently absorb nutrients (e.g., B vitamins) such as the elderly, benefit by taking a multivitamin/mineral pill daily. Research suggests that megadoses of certain nutrients (e.g., zinc) can significantly depress the immune system and can lead to negative health effects (e.g., kidney stones with too much C). Unless one is deficient in Vitamin C, studies show minimal effect of taking megadoses of C.

Do vaccines boost immune system? Fact: Being injected by dead or attenuated microorganisms triggers the body to develop antibodies to combat invasion by diseases-causing agents (e.g., viruses, bacteria). Research studies are looking at use of vaccines to boost immunity to combat cancerous diseases.

Does exercise boost or depress immunity? Fact: Mild exercise during a cold or flu does not appear to worsen one's illness. But, if one's infection has spread beyond the upper respiratory tract (symptoms would include fever, muscle aches, and swollen lymph glands), it is recommended a person allow from 2 to 4 weeks before engaging in intensive exercise. For light to moderate exercise, wait a week or so. There is evidence that overdoing exercise may depress the immune system. High-intensity or prolonged endurance exercise increases the output of blood epinephrine (adrenalin) and cortisol, which can depress immune function. But research shows exercise is beneficial to nurturing the immune system. Some studies show that sedentary people do not have as good an immune system as those who exercise. Your prescription! 30 minutes a day!

Do emotions affect your immunity? “When fighting an infection, immune cells are able to stimulate the brain to transmit the impulses that produce fever. Receptors for many of the chemicals released during stress, such as epinephrine and norepinephrine, have been observed on the surface of lymphocytes found near nerve terminals in the lymph nodes and spleen. This suggests that what goes on in the brain can interact with the immune system to suppress or, conversely, enhance it” (Berkeley Wellness Letter). Good social support is thought to improve immunity in people under stress. “If you were upbeat and chipper yesterday, chances are you have 28 percent less pain today. The opposite holds true, too: If you were down in the dumps yesterday, you may have more pain today” (*Pain*, online).

Smoking and immunity? Fact: smoking suppresses immune cells. When smokers quit, immune activity begins to improve within 30 days.

Nurturing your immune system: Engage in regular moderate exercise and eat a balanced and varied diet of vegetables, fruits, whole and fortified grains, dairy products, proteins (e.g., fish, poultry, meat, legumes, and nuts). For those whose diets are lacking or who do not adequately absorb nutrients, a basic multivitamin & mineral supplement is usually recommended. Beware of promises to boost immunity through use of protein and enzyme supplements, antioxidants, megavitamins and minerals, and other nostrums/products. Such products are regulated as foods, not as drugs, which means they don't have to be proven effective or actually contain the ingredients in the amounts as listed on the label! Very little control of supplements!