

# 7 Natural Ways to Boost Your Immune System

Did the new coronavirus make you reconsider the importance of boosting your health and immune system? If so, these natural techniques can help you learn how to boost immune system function.

Did the coronavirus make you reconsider learning how to boost immune system function and your overall health?

I bet the answer is yes.

Unlike never before, the topics of hygiene, immune function, and natural health remedies are amongst the biggest questions inside people's heads, and for good reason.

Avoiding catching the coronavirus cannot be guaranteed by any strategy or drug just yet, but it is becoming evident that people with a strong and reactive immune system are able to prevent catching it (at times) or minimize the health risks it involves.

I'm not a doctor. Nor do I play one on the Internet. So I'll leave the public health advice about the big picture stuff to the public health experts.

However, as a trainer with 10 years of experience and a few initials after my name, I do know one thing that is proven by science and backed by my own experience:

It's always a good idea to do everything you can to have your immune systems firing away at full speed.

People always ask me what they can do to boost their immune systems, and, as much as I love and believe in supplements, herbs, and (when necessary) medical drugs, I always tell those people that the most important thing to boost their immune system is to **master the basics** first.

These are things that you can do today that don't cost anything. I recommend you prioritize these basic steps for protecting and improving your health — and potentially your immune system.

While these actions are always important aspects of maintaining good health, they may be crucial during times of increased risk, like now.

## 1. Practice Proper Handwashing

The coronavirus, as well as most other viruses, are killed by proper handwashing for 20 seconds with soap or using hand sanitizer that is greater than 60% alcohol.

## 2. Don't Smoke

Smokers have an increased risk of catching infections and suffering severe complications from those infections [1] We shouldn't need more reasons not to smoke, but a time like this highlights the importance even more.

### **3. Get Adequate Sleep**

Sleep is important for health in general, and as a bonus, it may also benefit our immune function. For instance, one study<sup>[2]</sup> showed those with insomnia had, on average, less immune response to the influenza vaccine, while another study<sup>[3]</sup> on twins showed those with worse sleep had altered expression of genes related to immune function.

Again, the science in this area may not be robust, but when it comes to overall health, proper sleep helps. In times like these, you should prioritize sleep hygiene.

Since it's hard to quantify the quality of sleep, I like to use sleep tracking tools that measure your nighttime Heart Rate Variability (HRV). A high HRV has been associated in several studies<sup>[4]</sup> to an overall lower level of stress.

Companies who sell HRV tracking devices like Apple or Oura claim that, by tracking the HRV average of an individual, combined with resting heart rate and body temperature, they can quite accurately predict<sup>[5]</sup> whether you're going to catch a cold or the flu if you get in contact with a source of bacteria or viruses.

We still need more science to back up these claims, but, in my experience, tracking the above-mentioned variables is the best way we have to check on our immune system without having to get a blood analysis.

Also, if you're isolated at home, that likely means more time on electronics like tablets, phones, and TVs. This may be a good time to invest in blue-light blocking glasses and to look for non-tech related activities to do in the evening, like puzzles, crosswords, or reading an actual book (not an ebook!). Studies<sup>[6]</sup> show that filtering blue lights in the evening improves sleep and fights insomnia.

If you're looking to get better sleep in less time, this article may be able to help.

### **4. Get the Right Amount of Exercise**

Observational studies<sup>[7]</sup> show that those who exercise tend to suffer fewer infections than those who do not. While those studies have confounding variables, the general consensus is that exercise overall is likely beneficial, with some caveats.

Some studies<sup>[8]</sup> show bouts of strenuous exertion (>1.5 hours with an average heart rate >75% maximum) may temporarily decrease immune function. In addition, elite athletes who 'overtrain' tend to suffer from infections more frequently than others.

My advice? Stay active, but remember that now is not the time to start a new high-intensity exercise routine. If you already enjoy strenuous exercise, consider decreasing the frequency or intensity by 10-20% (this is not scientifically backed but is recommended by some experts). Also, try to focus on home or outside exercise. Shared gym equipment, like weights and cardio machines, may have surfaces that transmit the virus.

### **5. Manage Your Stress**

While acute stressors may temporarily enhance immune function, chronic stressors likely diminish immune function<sup>[9]</sup>. Worrying about the stock market, stressing about having enough toilet paper, and focusing on the uncertainties of the future can raise cortisol levels, which may negatively impact our immune function. While data is difficult to interpret in this area, one study showed medical students with increasing stress levels before their final exams had decreased function of natural killer cells, the cells that are the 'first responders' of our immune system.

We can't make stressful situations disappear, but we can all take measures to control our response to stress. Meditation, mindfulness exercises, and getting outside and going for walks are all examples of activities that are free and relatively easy to do.

Try starting with a simple morning meditation each day. This guide can help you get started.

## **6. Drink Alcohol in Moderation**

In times of stress, some people turn to alcohol as a coping mechanism. While meditation, nature walks, and mindfulness exercises are likely healthier ways of coping, for some they aren't enough, and alcohol adds a little something extra. There's no judging here. We all have to do what we can to get through tough times.

However, studies<sup>[10]</sup> show a relationship between chronic heavy alcohol consumption and increased susceptibility to infections. The trick is knowing where to draw the line. While there is little science, most experts suggest that a reasonable daily limit is two drinks for men and one drink for women.

Once the above-mentioned basics are part of your daily routine, you can consider boosting yourself with supplements.

## **7. Take Supplements**

Could taking vitamins, minerals, or other supplements help protect you from COVID-19? Contrary to what you might read on the internet, this is a question that can't be answered definitively. Here's what we do know about certain supplements that reportedly have immune-boosting properties.

### **Vitamin C**

For decades, Vitamin C has been used to help prevent the common cold. Among other functions, this vitamin can help maintain healthy skin<sup>[11]</sup> that provides a barrier to germs and other harmful invaders. In addition, some — but not all — studies suggest it may improve the function of certain white blood cells that fight infection.

While it's unclear whether taking a Vitamin C supplement is beneficial for COVID-19, for most people there's no harm in taking up to 2,000 mg per day (the upper limit set by the National Academy of Medicine).

### **Vitamin D**

As both a hormone and a vitamin, Vitamin D plays a number of important roles in our health.

In recent years, people have taken very high doses of Vitamin D with the intention of boosting immunity. But is this an effective tactic? A 2017 systematic review of 25 randomized trials found that taking a Vitamin D supplement seemed to have a mild protective effect against respiratory-tract infections in most people, but provided much greater protection in those who were very deficient in Vitamin D.<sup>[12]</sup>

If your Vitamin D levels are low, you may have a better chance of staying well if you supplement with 2,000 IU per day (or more, with medical supervision). Many — perhaps even most — people are deficient in vitamin D <sup>[13]</sup>, so it's probably wise to take a Vitamin D supplement right now, especially if you're at increased risk for COVID-19.

Of course, your body can make Vitamin D on its own when your skin is exposed to sunlight, so try to get some sun whenever you can. How much sun you need depends on the time of year and your location. A good starting point is 15 minutes of exposure to a large body part (such as the torso or back). Just remember to avoid sunburns, as excess sun exposure carries its own risks.

## **Zinc**

Zinc is a mineral involved in the white blood cell response to infection. Because of this, people who are deficient in zinc are more susceptible to cold, flu, and other viruses. One meta-analysis<sup>[14]</sup> of seven trials found that supplementing with zinc reduced the length of the common cold by an average of 33%. Whether it could have a similar effect on COVID-19 isn't yet known.

Taking supplementary zinc may be a good strategy for older people and others at increased risk. If you decide to take zinc, make sure to stay below the upper limit of 40 mg per day.

## **Magnesium**

During the last few years, magnesium (Mg) has been subject of research<sup>[15]</sup> due to its functionality in the organism. It is one of the most important micronutrients, and therefore its role in biological systems has been extensively investigated. Particularly, Mg has a strong relationship with the immune system, in both nonspecific and specific immune response, also known as innate and acquired immune response.

Studies have shown that most people are deficient in magnesium and, in my personal experience with clients, supplementing with magnesium always brings several health benefits. There are no direct correlations to the supplementation of magnesium and fighting the COVID-19, but there are plenty of studies showing the importance of having an adequate intake of magnesium for overall energy and health.

My advice is to supplement with 400-800mg of magnesium split in two or three daily doses.

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