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Nip the flu bug in the bud by managing stress



Yoga helps the body increase its immune function while reducing disease-assisting stress. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

By **PEG MOLINE**

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As the days get shorter, our thoughts turn to last year's flu and bronchitis season. The 2013-14 influenza season was particularly tough on the 25-to-64 age group, and experts say we should be prepared for a repeat performance. Is there a way to not just treat symptoms but prevent those and other illnesses in the first place?

“...It's important to remember that what we really need is a discriminating immune system — one that knows the difference between friends, benign companions and enemies.”

- Dr. Andrew Weil, author of "Spontaneous Healing"

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Research says yes. One key is managing stress. Way back in 1964, Dr. George F. Solomon, a professor of psychiatry at UCLA, was the first to prove a link between stress and dysfunctional immunity. Now we know that stress — both acute and chronic — can weaken your immune system, so many of the tips for preventing illness focus on managing anxiety and stress. The mechanism is primitive: "Too much stress triggers excessive production of the stress hormone cortisol, important in the fight-or-flight reaction," says Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum, coauthor of "Real Cause, Real Cure: The 9 Root Causes of the Most Common Health Problems and How to Solve Them." "This process is meant to protect us during life-threatening situations, so it shunts your body's resources away from immunity and toward quick production of adrenaline and energy."

The key, experts say, is helping your immune system regulate itself.

"One often hears about 'boosting' immunity with certain lifestyle practices, foods or supplements," says Dr. Andrew Weil, author of "Spontaneous Healing" and director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona. "But it's important to remember that what we really need is a discriminating immune system — one that knows the difference between friends, benign companions and enemies. When immunity can't make distinctions, the result can be autoimmune

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diseases such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis or Type 1 diabetes, in which healthy organs are attacked as if they were invaders. On the other hand, we need a robust ability to resist infection."

Here are five ways to help your immune system do its job:

Ode to joy

Yes, dancing and singing along with Pharrell Williams to "Happy" makes you feel, well, happy. But research also shows that music is a powerful tool in boosting your immunity. A study done at Sussex University in Britain and the Max Planck Institute in Germany found that people who listened to dance music had significantly higher levels of antibody immunoglobulin-A, one of the immune system's warriors, and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. A 2013 review of research out of McGill University in Montreal on music and health found that playing music and singing are even more powerful.

Strike a pose

Getting your om on helps stave off illness too. Scientists in New Delhi conducted a controlled study with 60 first-year medical students, one group getting a daily dose of 35 minutes of integrated yoga with a teacher. The control group did no yoga. At the end of 12 weeks, the students were given a test. The yoga students showed no increase in the stress hormone cortisol during the exam, while the control group's stress hormones were off the charts. The researchers concluded that yoga helps the body resist the impairment of cellular immunity during stressful events. And a daily practice is not necessary: Researchers found once and three times a week increased college students' immune levels after just eight weeks, with three times a week having the greater effect.

Gut reaction

Evidence keeps mounting that daily probiotics can ward off sickness in a number of ways. A study published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition suggests that probiotics, in the form of fermented foods such as yogurt, kombucha tea and kim chi, may strengthen a defense barrier in the gut that keeps out harmful microorganisms. Other theories hold that the "good" bacteria in probiotics help your intestines absorb the nutrients your body needs for a resilient immune system by reducing inflammation.

And while a 2011 study on probiotics and human immunity published by the National Institutes of Health calls for more research, the findings also state that probiotics have therapeutic potential for diseases including viral infection, allergies and eczema.

Some experts recommend probiotic supplements that contain 1 billion to 10 billion colony-forming units (or CFUs), and *Lactobacillus acidophilus* is the most commonly used strain (make sure the complete name is listed on the supplement facts label). According to experts at the University of Maryland Medical Center, *L. acidophilus* has been used to prevent and treat vaginal yeast infections with some success, and studies have found that the strains *Lactobacillus GG*, *Bifidobacterium longum* and *Bifidobacterium bifidum* may enhance the immune system.

Don't skimp on sleep

To keep your immune system in peak condition, you need at least eight hours of sleep a night. "The average night's sleep 130 years ago was nine hours a night. Now we're down to 63/4 hours," explains Teitelbaum. "Sleep deprivation triggers immune suppression." A study published by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology found that even a modest disturbance of sleep produced a reduction of natural immune responses and an alteration of cellular immune functions. After just one night of sleep deprivation from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m., otherwise healthy male volunteers showed a significant reduction in immune cell activity.

Rub it in

Find a professional massage therapist you like and trust, and treat yourself regularly. A



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I don't know about you, but as the days get shorter, my thoughts don't turn to last year's flu and bronchitis season. What a stupid sentence for a lede.

CZMIKE

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recent study in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine looked at the effects of one session of Swedish massage and found significant positive responses in immune function and a reduction of stress hormones. When breast cancer patients got 30-minute massages at least once a week, their immune cell levels rose, according to a study published in the Journal of Psychosomatic Research. Again, stress reduction appears to be crucial; women with breast cancer are at increased risk for elevated levels of anxiety and depression.

Peg Moline is the author of "The Doctor's Book of Natural Health Remedies."

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