

Beat Those Bugs
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Our immune system is directly responsible for our state of health. No one enjoys being sick and it is not normal to be sick all the time. Despite this many people suffer from chronic colds and flus and get caught in the antibiotic merry-go-round. This is the result of mistaken efforts to cure and suppression of our bodies natural defenses.

Immunity is the ability of the body to overcome infection. The immune system is one of the most complex systems of the body. It consists of the thymus, thyroid, spleen, bone marrow, adrenal glands, lymphatic vessels, lymph nodes, and specialized white blood cells such as B cells, T cells, macrophage “scavenger” cells, and antibodies. Each has a different responsibility but they all function together.

A healthy immune system will usually resist the most virulent of colds and flus with ease. Colds and flus are caused by viruses- minute organisms which are responsible for disease. We are exposed to these viruses all year round but during the winter months our immune defenses are overwhelmed and it makes us more vulnerable to attack. The first step is to discover what is causing our immune systems to become suppressed.

If the immune system is overworked by fighting off toxins that we continually subject it to it eventually breaks down. There are many factors responsible for the sad state of immune health today. The overuse of antibiotics is a big one and with that comes new strains of bacteria and viruses that are resistant to existing antibiotics. Chemical pollutants in our food, water and air result in a compromised immune system. It can become run-down from lack of fresh air, daily exercise and stress.

A sore throat, itchy eyes and runny nose are all symptoms brought about by our bodies immune response to cold and flu viruses. Therefore it does not make sense to severely suppress them through the use of commercial over-the-counter cold preparations and antibiotics. There is a time and place for antibiotics. Severe bacterial infections can run rampant when these valuable medications are not used but since antibiotics cannot kill viruses they are useless when given to treat the common cold or flu. The over-use of antibiotics can result in severe suppression of the immune system, in turn allowing more viruses to take over. If you have to take antibiotics be sure to follow it up with probiotics, or “good” bacteria, to prevent further susceptibility.

The naturopathic approach to disease is to eliminate disease by removing the root cause and by raising the body’s general vitality so that it’s natural and inherent ability to sustain health is allowed to dominate. Concentrate on eating simple, nutritious foods, soups, whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables and their juices, and lots of liquids to help flush out toxins. Drink a green energy drink daily, such as Greens +, as it contains a healthy dose of vitamins and minerals as well as antioxidants and fibre. Fruit juices are too sweet on their own so dilute them. Glucose and Vitamin C compete for the same transport sites into white blood cells. For this reason avoid sugar and sugary foods when you are sick, as 1 tsp of sugar can shut down your immune system for 8 hours. Flax seed oil is an excellent source of omega-3 essential fatty acids and helps strengthen our bodies resistance to infections.

There are many herbs, vitamins and minerals that particularly in combination can significantly reduce the risk of contracting a cold and/or reduce the symptoms and duration. Herbs like Echinacea, goldenseal, garlic, astragalus and pau d'arco are beneficial to have on hand. Echinacea, or purple coneflower, has been used for centuries to heal infections and wounds. It activates the B and T cells, the two most important soldier cells of the immune system and helps the lymphatic system remove toxins and waste materials. Take echinacea and goldenseal, a natural antibiotic, at the first sign of a sniffle. Astragalus increases the number of immune cells improving the overall activity of the immune system. Pau d'arco is anti-microbial and is an effective killer of viruses, bacteria, worms and fungi. Medicinal mushrooms, like reishi, shitake and maitake have been used extensively throughout history to treat a wide variety of conditions, including low immune function, cancer and high stress levels. Oil of oregano is a rich source of a variety of vitamins and minerals and is especially rich in Vitamin C. Take one dose a day throughout the winter for cold and flu prevention. Garlic can help ward off a cold by warming the body and it has antiviral and antibacterial properties.

Vitamin C helps our white blood cells engulf and destroy viral invaders while increasing the antibodies needed to fight infection. There are no adverse effects from taking high doses of Vitamin C but if diarrhea occurs as a result, you have reached your bowel tolerance and can reduce the dosage. Vitamin A helps protect the mucous membranes of the mouth, nose, throat and lungs. This helps prevent invasion by other disease-causing organisms such as bacteria which may cause a secondary infection. It can be taken in the form of beta-carotene, a precursor of Vitamin A, in higher dosages. Zinc lozenges soothe a sore throat and help fend off a cold before it takes hold.

There are many important lifestyle tools that can help keep your defenses up. Good sleep is essential since our immune system functions best while we are asleep. Many infections could be avoided if we simply washed our hands more; 10-15 times per day is a good goal. Add tea tree oil to a vaporizer or sprinkle a few drops on a handkerchief and place under your pillow. And last but not least, my favourite home remedy is the "warming socks" technique. This procedure should be used at the first sign of any congestion in the eyes, ears, sinus, throat or lungs. Soak a pair of cotton socks in cold water. After wringing them out thoroughly place the wet socks on your feet, cover them with thick wool socks and go to bed. You will find the wet cotton socks will be dry in the morning.

Remember that the cornerstone to good health is a strong immune system. Don't wait until you are sick. Nourish your immune system every day.