

# Concerned about coronavirus? Now is the time to build your immunity!



by Miles Hassell MD

It's easy to feel helpless while we wait for an effective treatment for coronavirus (COVID-19), but there are simple steps we can all take to build up our immunity, not just to protect us from a flu virus, but also from most other preventable diseases. We all have some adjustments we can make to our food and activity choices to boost our immunity and lower our risk factors, and right now is the best time to start! By the way, type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure are both associated with weakened immunity, and the steps to boost immunity are the same ones you would take to reverse these two conditions: simply treating them with medications does little to improve immunity. The following steps will even reduce your risk of premature cancers, heart disease and stroke, dementia, and depression. (For a 14-step plan to reverse type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, turn to the *Risk Reduction Action Plan* on pages 90-110 of [Good Food, Great Medicine](#), 4<sup>th</sup> edition.)

## **Our recommendation:**

As well as the usual flu-fighting precautions (hand washing, coughing protocol, social distancing, and so forth), these nine steps will help develop and maintain a robust and fighting-fit immune system.

- 1. Eat at home!** With most of us spending more time at home these days, better health through home cooking has never been more convenient! The kitchen is the best place to work on strengthening the immune system: processed foods are associated with worse health outcomes, while homemade whole foods are associated with better immunity. Prepare your own food from scratch where possible, and include vegetables or whole fruit, protein, and healthy fat with every meal and snack. (There are lots of tips and suggestions on pages 111–150 in *Good Food, Great Medicine*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition.)
- 2. Minimize sugars, sweet drinks, fruit juice, and refined grains.** These high starch/high carbohydrate foods contribute to abnormal sugar metabolism, including type 2 diabetes and prediabetes. As mentioned in the introduction, diabetes is associated with depressed immunity, and vulnerability to severe complications from flu viruses and a host of other maladies.
- 3. Eat high-quality protein.** Your immune system runs on protein, so make sure you include beans, whole grains, fish (especially oil rich fish such as salmon, herring, sardines and tuna), poultry, eggs, cultured dairy (yogurt, kefir and cheese), and unprocessed meat (beef, lamb, and pork).
- 4. Culture a healthy microbiome,** a diverse range of good bugs in your intestines (gut). Your microbiome is dependent on eating a wide range of whole foods to "feed" your gut, of which whole grains may be the most important. Eat cultured foods such as plain yogurt and kefir, and traditional fermented foods like fresh sauerkraut -- but remember that most whole foods are also loaded with probiotics. Apple cider vinegar (1–2 tablespoons per day in salad dressing or in a glass of water or sparkling water) also helps the microbiome. We recommend that you do not take probiotic supplements: they can actually have a harmful effect by narrowing the diversity of the gut bugs.
- 5. Exercise!** The contribution of exercise to immunity and overall health is poorly appreciated. Need antioxidants? Exercise! Need anti-inflammatories? Exercise! Want to cut your risk of influenza? Exercise! Want to reverse your type 2 diabetes? Exercise! Many exercise recommendations exist: include something two or three times a day, even if only for 5–10 minutes each time, upper and lower body, and get a bit short of breath and sweaty. Skip rope, climb stairs, go for a brisk walk, toss a medicine ball, use a rowing machine, play pickleball. . . find *something* that works for you.
- 6. Sleep is an essential nutrient** our bodies can't store, and is restorative to every aspect of our immune systems. Schedule 7 – 9 hours nightly, especially if you're concerned about getting sick.

7. **Heat, as in regular deep hot baths** (for 15–30 minutes daily) or saunas (5–10 minutes a few times per week) seem to improve cardiovascular risk, mood, blood sugar, and help with weight management. The important factor may be the transient increase in core body temperature activating the immune system.
8. **Sunlight** seems to boost the immune system, too. Admittedly, here in Portland it is not a dependable presence for much of the year; in winter, take advantage of any sunny days to get some outdoor activity.
9. **Finally, consider cutting back on screen time:** it will not only allow you more time to work on the previous 8 immune-boosting steps, but will also reduce your exposure to an unhealthy level of coronavirus news!

**What if you *do* get the flu, or symptoms that you suspect could be coronavirus?**

Contact your physician, especially if you are in a high-risk group due to your health history, known exposure, or recent travel to a high-risk area. Meanwhile, read our [Cold, Flu, and Sinusitis](#) handout on our website for treatment tips, useful information about natural remedies and pharmaceutical options – and even recipes!

**More resources**

For more immune-boosting ideas and recipes read *Good Food, Great Medicine* 4<sup>th</sup> edition, especially the prescription on pages 22–23. For more information about the flu, a couple of online resources are: [uptodate.com/patients](http://uptodate.com/patients) and [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov).

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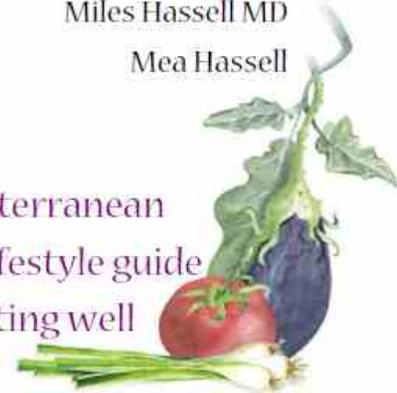
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