

Immune Health Through a Holistic Approach

By Rebekah James, Home Care Manager

A holistic approach to boosting the immune system maximizes the body's potential to fight off unwanted illnesses. To achieve this, it is important to focus on supporting the body as a whole rather than addressing isolated symptoms. Incorporating a combination of healthy lifestyle practices such as nutrition, sleep, and stress management can help reduce inflammation and promote balance; the immune system works best when there is a state of homeostasis in the body. The immune system is made up of cells, tissues, and organs that protect the body from harmful bacteria, viruses, and parasites. Integrating holistic techniques can create a stronger immune system.

Circadian rhythm, the body's internal wake and sleep clock, regulates important functions of the body including the sleep cycle. Writing for the [Botanica Health](#) blog, Dr. Miranda Wiley explains how an adequate amount of sleep can affect the immune system in positive ways as they are directly correlated. Improper sleep patterns can lead to fluctuations in the circadian rhythm, resulting in an unbalanced immune system. Stress can have a negative impact on our circadian rhythm. Managing stress can help lower cortisol levels, a stress hormone, which can increase the efficiency of the immune system.

Exercise improves circulation by allowing immune cells to move throughout the body thus promoting blood flow and virus detection. Exercise can enhance the benefits of sleep and managing stress by increasing their efficiency. Staying active can help reduce the risk of infections and improve recovery times. Some forms of exercise are walking, running, and biking. Low impact activities like swimming and yoga are also beneficial.

As we age, our immune systems weaken over time and have a longer recovery process. Older adults often eat less throughout the day so they often miss out on healthy nutrients found in a balanced diet. This can increase the risk for common disorders including hypertension, coronary artery disease, bronchial asthma, diabetes mellitus, obesity, chronic liver diseases, psoriasis, arthritis, and cancer, among others. The website for the [Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health](#) has lots of information to support the idea that eating a balanced diet is important to maintain a strong immune system, which can help prevent certain conditions. Some of these nutrient rich foods are:

Vitamin C: helps with the production of white blood cells (citrus fruits)

Vitamin D: influences production of immune cells (fatty fish)

Zinc: promotes cell function (meats, nuts, and seeds)

Beta Carotene: converts into Vitamin A serving as an antioxidant (spinach, kale, carrots, bell peppers, sweet potatoes)

Probiotics: live bacteria that balances gut (yogurt, kefir, miso)

Lifestyle changes can complement traditional medicine and help promote a healthy immune system. There are also alternatives to medications that can help strengthen the immune system. Natural supplements can be taken in several ways: tablets, teas, essential oils. Echinacea is an antioxidant rich plant often found in herbal tea. Garlic contains active ingredients that have antiviral effects. Green tea has tea catechins which contain cells that can help prevent flu and cold-like symptoms. It is important to consult your physician before introducing any supplements, as they can interact with certain prescription medications.

Rebekah James recently graduated with dual degrees in Holistic Health and Psychology from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her goal is to promote wellness and holistic well-being to the community.