



Focus on Wellness

BE A BAD HOST: How to Strengthen Your Immune System

by Maria Noël Groves, Clinical Herbalist & Co-op Wellness Educator

Louis Pasteur, a famous father of the germ theory, reportedly made an important confession on his deathbed:

"I was wrong. The microbe is nothing. The terrain is everything." The confession gives a nod to Pasteur's infectious disease colleague Claude Bernard, who believed that the health of the host in a large part determined whether or not a germ could take hold. Now that we have entered the time of year when cold and flu viruses run rampant, it's helpful to remember that there are a lot of things you can do to maintain a healthy immune system that is better able to resist and fend off those pesky germs so you're less likely to even *get* sick.

First and foremost is rest and stress management. A single night of sleep deprivation almost immediately weakens the immune system, and most people get colds when they are trying to do too much. Getting good nutrients through a healthy, whole foods diet and exercising regularly will also help. Sugar and excess alcohol tend to make us more susceptible to germs. Isn't it amazing how these same basic pillars of good health make or break so *many* different diseases? Put them on your priority list.

Good health and immune function also relies on proper hydration and lubrication of the skin and mucus membranes – think of them as your protective castle walls. Besides drinking water, easy answers include soup, broth, and tea. Consider eating foods and herbs that are rich in carotenoids, vitamin A, vitamin C, omega 3-fatty acids, and other healthy fats. Winter squash, pumpkins, leafy greens, calendula flowers, stinging nettle, bell and hot peppers, fatty fish, flaxseeds, walnuts, and hemp seeds are just a few of the foods to indulge in.

Then we want to amp up pungent herbs and spices, which boost circulation, improve digestion, and create a less hospitable environment for germs. Strong digestive juices should kill microbes that you

swallow (including those trapped by nasal mucus), and good bacteria in your gut make it harder for the bad guys to take hold. Lots of garlic (raw and stinky, if you can handle it), onions, ginger, horseradish, hot peppers, curry, turmeric, oregano, and sage. As their antimicrobial oils emanate from your lungs and skin, they act as a sort of force field against germs. Try to eat or drink a selection of these medicinal foods daily.

Medicinal mushrooms and certain herbs, taken regularly, target your immune cells directly so that your body can better fend off a wide range of immune assaults – from the basic cold and flu to cancer and Lyme disease. Maitake, shiitake, and reishi are the three most-researched mushrooms, which are relatively easy to get as a food (fresh or dried) or supplement. Tender, tasty shiitakes and maitakes are delicious cooked in dishes and simmered in soups at least a few days a week. Make your own immune tonic broth by adding these tasty mushrooms with a few reishi slices (too tough to eat and not great tasting), a chicken carcass, and mild-flavored immune herbs like astragalus and codonopsis. Simmer for three hours, strain, and use the broth in dishes or sip it daily. Vegetarians can skip the chicken and stir in some miso paste just before serving. Astragalus, codonopsis, and eleuthero blend well in teas with cinnamon, ginger, cloves, and star anise to make a tasty chai. Though the Co-op doesn't carry a wide selection of loose medicinal herbs (try your local herb shop), you can find these herbs in the Co-op's supplement section and packaged tea blends. Drinking green tea regularly also appears to prevent and treat common viral infections.

The basic tenants of hygiene, with a nod to Pasteur, are still important. Wash your hands regularly with plain soap and warm water. Antibacterial soaps and products generally do not perform any better, and they encourage germs to morph into potentially dangerous supergerms. Try to avoid contact with sick people; and if you do get sick, stay home to rest and get well while limiting the spread of the infection. ■

Recipes and more at www.WintergreenBotanicals.com.



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