



## Boost Your Immune System!

By Gina Van Luven

It seems this time of year, with the holiday season approaching, brings both joy and dread – not just because of overspending, overeating or over committing yourself; but because it is **COLD and FLU season**. According to the American Lung Association, only about 10-20 percent of the U.S. population gets sick with influenza (“the flu”) each year. This seems like an awfully low number considering there are over 200 strains of flu and most people I know get the flu at least once every year. As low as these numbers appear to be, they represent an average of 200,000 hospitalizations and 60,000 deaths each year. This may make you want to run out in get a flu shot (which covers only a few, most common strains of the flu). However, I want to point out that if you actually contract influenza (or any virus); it is not just because you were exposed to the virus. **Contracting a virus means you have to 1) be exposed and 2) have a suppressed immune system**. So, why are people not focusing on the immune system, which allowed the virus to infect you to begin with?

Remember, **a healthy immune system will ward off sickness and disease** all by itself! People who rarely get sick can usually pinpoint exactly what caused them to get sick when indeed they do. The following are key “triggers” to damaging the immune system:

- Stress
- Lack of sleep
- Too many processed foods
- Too much sugar
- Too much alcohol

**(See details of each “trigger” below, along with solutions to each)**

Avoiding “triggers” is extremely important in maintaining a healthy immune system. However, it is also important to **eat foods that actually “boost” your immune system**. Foods high in anti-oxidants like berries, red grapes, garlic, green tea, walnuts, pecans, artichokes and the beloved chocolate (preferable in raw bean form, called “cacao”). Garlic, ginger and turmeric are all immune boosting spices. Shitake mushrooms increase white blood cell production, which is an integral part of your body’s immune system. Dark, leafy greens like arugula, beet greens, collard greens, dandelion greens, kale, spinach and Swiss chard (among others) are very high in nutrients and fiber and help to cleanse the blood. Cruciferous vegetables like broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage and cauliflower also provide anti-oxidant protection, as does any fruit or vegetable with Vitamins A, C and E. Therefore, be sure to eat lots of fresh fruits and vegetables and take a good, quality multi-vitamin (some are actually more detrimental than good; so do your research).

If you do feel like you are coming down with something, herbs like Echinacea, goldenseal, Oregon grape root, oregano oil and garlic can help boost up your immune system and knock out whatever is trying to take hold. If anything, these herbs can minimize symptoms and/or shorten the duration. However, you usually need to begin taking them during the onset of the infection and continue through at least twenty four hours after you are symptom-free.



Okay, let us get into the details of the “triggers.”

### **Stress**

We all have it. It is nearly inescapable in modern times. However, it is how you “manage” your stress, more than trying to avoid stress altogether. For example, you are driving to work and the traffic is terrible – a potentially stressful situation. Do you get bent out of shape? Or, do you opt to turn on the radio and enjoy some music instead? Each and every one of you is the controller of your own behavior. Others can do things that upset you. However, it is ultimately YOU who determine how to react.

**SOLUTION:** Be aware of how you react to stressful situations. If you know you do not handle stressful situations that way you would like to, be sure to find someone who can assist you in “reprogramming” your response system. Trust me, it really works! Also, be sure to take time to “de-stress.” Take a relaxing bath, meditate, watch a good movie, read an inspirational book, listen to uplifting music, exercise or whatever else helps you de-stress. Take time for YOU every day!

### **Lack of Sleep**

“Burning the candle at both ends” can catch up with you over the long term. Everyone has a different threshold with regard to the number of hours needed to get the appropriate amount of rest. Some people may only require about 6 hours of sleep per night. Others need 8-9. The point is that everyone is unique and you should honor your body’s needs. The body must get the right amount of rest in order to replenish itself. If you want to stay healthy, sleep is a must.

**SOLUTION:** If you do not get enough rest during the week, be sure to have some down time over the weekend and sleep in or take a nap. The experts say that you cannot catch up on your sleep. However, you certainly can “refresh” your body after days of not getting enough rest. Ideal sleep hours are from 10:00 pm to 6:00 am, which is when your body’s organ systems replenish themselves. If you see that lack of sleep is becoming a pattern, address what is happening in your life that you may be able to change.

### **Too Many Processed Foods**

Eating too many processed foods often means you are not eating enough “whole foods.” While not all processed foods are bad, many contain harmful ingredients like *synthetic dyes* (ex: FD&C Red No.40), *preservatives* (like nitrates, benzoate, BHT, TBHQ and MSG), *hydrogenated oils* or *high-fructose corn syrup*, all of which can suppress the immune system.

**SOLUTION:** Eat lots of fresh fruits and vegetables (4-5 servings per day). Doing so will usually “crowd out” (not leave enough room for) processed food. If you do eat processed foods, be sure to choose ones that do not contain the harmful ingredients mentioned above.

### **Too Much Sugar**

Sugar consumption is at epidemic proportions. It takes a mere “2 teaspoons” of sugar to suppress your immune system, and the average American consumes a whopping “40” teaspoons every single day! It is



*A Personalized Approach to Wellness*

no wonder why so many people get sick and diseased. It is interesting that the time of year with the highest incidences of cold and flu is at the same time when sugar consumption is at its highest (October 31<sup>st</sup> through early January). In December, I will do an article on sugar, so you can get a clear picture of what sugar actually does to your body.

**SOLUTION:** First, review the list of ingredients in most of the foods you eat, including condiments. Do they contain a lot of sugar? It is important to watch the number of grams of sugar you consumer; but more importantly to avoid consuming "high-fructose corn syrup. Second, when you eat those holiday sweets, limit the number of "helpings" you take. If you are generally a "two or more" helpings person because you like to sample everything, cut each helping in half or even thirds. Third, if you "crave" something sweet, eat a "naturally" sweet food first (like a piece of fruit, dried fruits or sweet vegetables, like carrots, snap peas, beets, squash or yams). Finally, try baking with "Xylitol" which has a lower glycemic index than cane sugar (meaning it does not spike blood sugar like cane sugar does). You can get Xylitol at any health food store, and it can be used one-to-one in place of cane sugar.

### **Too Much Alcohol**

Eat, drink and be merry! Many people tend to overindulge in the "eat" and "drink" part and end up not so merry later. Holiday parties and family get-togethers can often bring excess alcohol consumption, leaving your immune system wide open for that next virus to come along and take over.

**SOLUTION:** Instead of trying to count drinks, try drinking a full glass of water before and between drinks. This trick does two things: 1) It fills you up a bit and makes you lest apt to drink as much alcohol over the course of the evening and 2) it hydrates your body, making you lest apt to have a hangover the next day. Additionally, try to avoid mixed drinks containing a lot of sugar. Sugar can speed up the effects of the alcohol and, because they are so sweet, cause you to drink more than you realize. It is also important to eat plenty of carbohydrates and protein while drinking in order to slow down the effects of the alcohol.

In closing, there are many factors that contribute to a dysfunctional immune system and many ways to **boost** your immune system. Even in reading through this article and getting some ideas for what do to, you may still feel you need some assistance in applying these strategies or learning new ones. If this is the case, I would be happy to assist you in creating a health strategy that is right for you. As your Health Coach, I am your personal advocate for creating a healthier, happier life. Please feel free to contact me to schedule an appointment for a complimentary health evaluation