

Boost Immunity with Ayurveda

by Shannon Mooney

According to Ayurveda, immunity and natural resistance to disease in the body goes hand in hand with good health. The concept of health, according to Ayurveda is not only being free of disease but also when there is balance between the three doshas, vata, pitta, and kapha, there is proper functioning of the digestive fire or agni, the three waste products (urine, feces, and sweat) are in normal quantity and balanced, the five senses are working normally, and the mind, body and consciousness are functioning in blissful harmony. Ayurveda holds that a person in good health will not be affected by even the most contagious disease.

The function of the immune system is to protect our bodies against foreign invaders. The invaders can come in the form of actual foreign bodies such as bacteria, viruses, fungi or parasites, collectively called pathogens. Unwelcome entities can also be created from within as with auto-immune disorders and cancer. Proper immune function is an intricate balancing act. While a weakened immune system predisposes one to virtually every type of illness, it is also possible that an immune response becomes overactive or misdirected, targeting the body's own tissues for foreign invaders and attacking them. When functioning properly, our immune systems are able to discriminate effectively, knowing when to fight the bad guys and when to back down.

Immunity is influenced by the power of agni, digestive fire and our ability to digest, assimilate and absorb nutrients in our bodies. Within a healthy body where immune function is strong, any invaders are either neutralized or destroyed then expelled and the body returns to normal. If agni is impaired by an imbalance within the tridosha, metabolism is affected and the immune response and natural resistance are lowered. If the body is unhealthy or has ama, stored toxins from undigested food, then an environment is created in which invaders are encouraged to thrive. Ama can be created from both physical and mental indigestion. It serves as fertile ground upon which parasites feed and settle into weak spots in the body.

According to Ayurveda, ama is the root of all physical disease. Indigestion and ama formation prevents nutrients from reaching the tissues and weakens immune function. Ama can result from improper eating habits and unhealthy lifestyle practices. Our relationships, stress and traumas also greatly impact our digestive process and immune function.

Particularly when you engage in an activity or indulge in food that you know is not good for you but you do it anyway, you are committing prajnaparabda, a crime against wisdom. Not only are you promoting ama formation and creating a toxic environment within the body, but you are also weakening your will. The strength of your will and identity are in direct correlation to immune function. Discipline and healthy relationships help to build your sense of self. When your identity with your self is strong, then the cells in the body are better able to differentiate 'self' from 'non-self' and kill off that which is not serving the whole.

The body naturally wants to become balanced and healthy. Each and every cell of the body possesses an intelligence encoded with a will to live, be healthy and work together as a whole, communicating with the other cells of the body. Ayurveda is a system of medicine that supports the

natural proclivity toward balance and offers guidelines regarding diet, lifestyle, herbs, and the stress relieving techniques of yoga, meditation, and pranayama as a formula for achieving health and longevity.

Diet

Strengthen your digestion. Bring awareness to your digestive process, noting how you feel (physically and mentally) after each meal. Proper digestion will result in feelings of lightness, energy, and satisfaction. Watch your portion size and be mindful not to overeat. Choose foods that are in accordance with your constitution. Balancing the doshas through diet can enable you to better support your health and protect against illness.

There are several immune enhancing medicinal foods and herbs traditionally used in Ayurveda. Foods such as milk, ghee or clarified butter and honey all enhance ojas, the subtle essence that supports immunity.

Other suggestions:

- Include many fresh organic fruits, vegetables, nuts, and lentils in your diet. These provide you with nutrients, antioxidants and fiber necessary for immune function.
- Sip hot water or fresh ginger tea throughout the day to boost the digestion.
- Limit sugar intake. Simple sugars impair white blood cells activity leading to a depressed immune system.
- Limit alcohol. Alcohol can impair white blood cells mobility.

Lifestyle

There are several lifestyle choices that can tip the scales toward illness or health. Here are some lifestyle practices that can help boost a healthy immune system:

- Take meals at regular times each day. Regular meals help to prepare the body for a time of nourishment by increasing appetite and enhancing digestion.
- Maintain a healthy body weight. Excess weight is a burden for the body. Placing undue stress on organs and metabolic functions impairs immune function.
- Get regular exercise. Just the right amount of movement helps the body to become more resilient to various health problems.
- Get sufficient, good-quality sleep. The body restores itself and counters the effects of stress during sleep and relaxation. Immune cells circulate through the body in relation to cycles of sleep and wakefulness. A lack of sleep can interrupt this process.

Herbs

Ayurvedic formulas such as Sitopaladi and Mahasudarshan have traditionally been used to prevent colds and flu, as well as the Western herbs Osha and Echinacea, which are well known as powerful immunostimulants. These herbs may be needed protection to stay healthy through the fluctuations of the season. Triphala can also be taken daily to gently cleanse and tone the large intestine, helping to keep the body free of ama.

Yoga

A basic relaxation in corpse pose can help to reduce stress, lower blood pressure and heart rate,

reduce muscular tension, reduce fatigue, improve sleep, and enhance immune response. Allow yourself to feel fully supported by the ground and let go of tensions you may be holding.

Meditation

Establish a regular habit of sitting in a special, quiet place each day. Meditating for short periods each day can greatly reduce anxiety and stress, improve your quality of life, as well as boost immune function.

- Sit quietly, firmly rooted, focusing on the crown of your head and your breath.
- Bring your awareness to the natural rhythm of your breath.
- Notice the gentle inhalation, exhalation and the short pause of retention in between.
- If the mind begins to wander, invite it back to the breath.
- Allow thoughts to ebb and flow with the breath, staying perfectly present to each moment.

Pranayama

Yogic breathwork or pranayama is an excellent way to revitalize prana within the body. Pranayama is a practice in controlling the breath. Pranayama cleanses and strengthens the physical body while calming and clearing the mind. It is important to practice with the proper posture to allow the breath to move freely in the body. Try alternate nostril breathing to balance the breath and support immunity.

Position the right hand (you may choose to alternate with each practice) in Vishnu mudra by folding the index finger and third finger inwards to lightly touch at the base of the thumb. Your pinkie finger rests by the side of the ring finger. You will alternately use your thumb to close your right nostril and your ring and pinkie fingers, working as one, to close your left. Rest your left hand comfortably in your lap. The breath should never feel forced. Envision the breath as a light thread of silk, lengthening effortlessly with each inhalation and exhalation.

Keeping the breath relaxed, subtle and light:

- Close the left nostril and exhale completely through the right.
- Inhale fully, through the right nostril.
- Close right nostril and exhale through the left nostril.
- Inhale through left nostril.
- Close left nostril and exhale through right nostril.

This is one round. Begin a slow and regular practice of 5-10 rounds. Rest after your practice and notice how you are feeling. Once comfortable with this practice, you can begin mentally counting to four on your inhalation, pause at the space between the breath and then count to four as you exhale so that the length of your inhalation and exhalation are equal.

The Sanskrit word for immunity is vyadhikshamatva which translates as 'forgiveness of disease'. By being flexible, practicing acceptance and adapting to our ever-changing environment you can enhance immune function. Resistance to change and clinging to challenges will only impede health. This type of flexibility is about becoming more whole and saying 'yes' to life. It is about positively accepting all that comes your way, even the pain and suffering, allowing yourself to be with it.

Although this is more of a mental and spiritual process, it is important to remember in the face of adversity, when something does not go your way.

Understanding the immune system and how it is influenced can help us to take more responsibility for our health. Many of the practices to support good health and immunity are intertwined. Lowering stress levels can help you to sleep more soundly and choose more nutritious foods. Sleeping more soundly can give you more energy to exercise. Ayurveda's holistic approach can help you develop a lifestyle that is good for your body and your mind while supporting health and immunity.