

- Immune system / Diseases—Prevention

Lowering your immune age can protect you from bugs and viruses this winter

As winter sets in, our immune systems are being put to the test as we are exposed to bugs and viruses once again.

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Our immune system is a complex biological network that protects our bodies from viruses and disease, but like all systems it weakens with age.



This decline in immunity happens to us all, but now scientists are discovering how our lifestyles can speed up or slow down the rate at which it does.

Obesity, stress and behaviours such as smoking can raise your immune age, while healthy changes can turn back the clock and lower it, reducing the risk of serious illness and helping you live longer.

In other words, a 35-year-old can have the immune system of a 50-year-old, or a healthy 60-year-old could have that of a much younger adult.

Immunity is for life, not just for the easing of pandemic restrictions. How well you take care of your immune system will determine how it – and you – will age.

Regular exercise can give you the immunity of a 25-year-old

Studies show regular exercise in old age can prevent a decline of the immune system. Our immune system declines by 2–3 per cent a year from our 20s.

Older exercisers have extra protection from this decline, are protected more from viruses and will respond better to vaccines.

Even a daily lunchtime walk will help. Moving every day is essential for your lymphatic system, which helps your immune cells perform more efficiently.

Look after your muscles, too – strength training has been shown to have the effect of sheltering certain types of T-cells, important in our immune response.

Eat more protein

Evidence shows that poor gut health can increase immune age, while a healthy microbiome can slow down the ageing process.

Aim to eat as many different plant foods as possible, and protein, with every meal to support the antibodies needed by your immune system. Slow fermented sourdough bread is good for gut diversity, as is seasonal fruit and vegetables, whole grains and legumes.

Protein includes pulses, nuts, seeds, tofu, dairy and eggs, as well as meat and fish, especially oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, trout and sardines.

A cold shower may stop you getting sick

Exposure to cold temperatures stresses the immune system in a beneficial way, creating an antiageing effect.

Even short bursts of cold water triggers the body's immune system so at the end of every shower, turn the temperature to the coldest setting for 20 or 30 seconds.

Get outside – and take vitamin D

Vitamin D's role in immunity is now well established. Experts agree that we should spend plenty of time outside and take supplements during winter.

There is reasonably strong evidence that people deficient in vitamin D are more likely to get respiratory infections. About a third of us are vitamin D deficient. Our main source is exposure to sunlight.

Sleep, let go of resentment and see friends

When we're asleep, our immune system releases proteins called cytokines, which are needed to fight infection or inflammation in the body, or to cope with stress. A lack of sleep can decrease production of these cytokines, as well as infection-fighting antibodies.

Avoiding, or managing, stress and letting go of resentment is important too.

Analysis suggests that different personality types have different immune responses. If you're quick to anger, your immune system is constantly primed for inflammation and will weaken more with age.

Stress really dampens down our immune system, so find ways to manage it.

Be mindful of turning to alcohol to unwind. A 2014 study found that binge drinking (defined in the study as consuming up to five measures of spirits) reduced levels of white blood cells, which combat infections, making your immune system less active.

Turning to hobbies to relax – such as sport, music, art or cooking – is a better idea, and maintaining friendships too.

Social connections have also been found to be important in immune ageing because when we feel lonely our immune systems go on high alert and an inflammatory response takes place.

So while a return to the office may feel daunting, it could actually give your immune system a boost!