

Ways to Boost Children's Immunity

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What can parents do to protect their child from the endless array of germs and viruses he's exposed to every day? Unfortunately, in some ways, getting sick is simply a fact of life for kids. "We all enter this world with an inexperienced immune system," says Charles Shubin, M.D., an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Maryland. Slowly, children prime their immunity by battling an ongoing series of germs, viruses, and other organisms – which is why many pediatricians consider six to eight colds, bouts of flu, or ear infections per year as normal for children. But there are healthy habits parents can adopt that will give their children's immune system a boost.



1. **Serve more fruits and vegetables.** Carrots, green beans, oranges, strawberries: these all contain such immunity-boosting phytonutrients as vitamin C and carotenoids, says William Sears, M.D., author of "The Family Nutrition Book." Phytonutrients may increase the body's production of infectionfighting white blood cells and interferon, an antibody that coats cell surfaces, blocking out viruses. Studies show that a diet rich in phytonutrients can also protect against such chronic diseases as cancer and heart disease in adulthood. Kids shall be made to eat five servings of fruits and veggies a day. (A serving is about two tablespoons for toddlers, 1 cup for older kids.)
2. **Boost sleep time.** Studies on adults show that sleep deprivation can make one more susceptible to illness by reducing natural killer cells, immune-system weapons that attack microbes and cancer cells. The same holds true for children, says Kathi Kemper, M.D., director of the Center for Holistic Pediatric Education and Research at Children's Hospital. Children in daycare are particularly at risk for sleep deprivation because all the activity can make it difficult for them to nap. How much sleep do kids need? A newborn may need up to 18 hours of crib time a day, toddlers require 12 to 13 hours, and preschoolers need about 10 hours. "If your child can't or won't take naps during the day, try to put her to bed earlier," says Dr. Kemper.
3. **Breast-feed your baby.** Breast milk contains turbocharged immunity-enhancing antibodies and white blood cells. Nursing guards against ear infections, allergies, diarrhea, pneumonia, meningitis, urinary tract infections, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Studies show that it may also enhance the baby's brain power and help protect her against insulin-dependent diabetes, Crohn's disease, colitis, and certain forms of cancer later in life. Colostrum, the thin yellow "pre-milk" that flows from the mother's breasts during the first few days after birth, is especially rich in disease-fighting antibodies, says Dr. Shubin. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that moms breastfeed for a year. If this commitment isn't realistic, mothers may aim to breastfeed for at least the first two to three months in order to supplement the immunity the baby received in utero.

4. Exercise as a family. Research shows that exercise increases the number of natural killer cells in adults – and regular activity can benefit kids in the same way, says Ranjit Chandra, M.D., a pediatric immunologist at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. To get children into a lifelong fitness habit, parents shall be a good role models. “Exercise with them rather than just urge them to go outside and play,” says Renee Stucky, Ph.D., a clinical assistant professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at the University of Missouri Medical School. Fun family activities include bike riding, hiking, basketball, and tennis.

5. Guard against germ spread. Fighting germs doesn't technically boost immunity, but it's a great way to reduce stress on children's immune system. Parents shall make sure their kids wash their hands often – and with soap. Particular attention shall be given to the kids' hygiene before and after each meal and after playing outside, handling pets, blowing their nose, using the bathroom, and arriving home from daycare. When they're out, parents shall carry disposable wipes with them for quick cleanups. To At home, giving kids their own brightly colored hand towels and soap in fun shapes, colors, and scents can help get them into the hand-washing habit.

Another key germ-busting strategy: “If your child gets sick, throw out her toothbrush right away,” says Barbara Rich, D.D.S., a spokesperson for the Academy of General Dentistry. A child can't catch the same cold or flu virus twice, but the virus can hop from toothbrush to toothbrush, infecting other family members. If it's a bacterial infection, such as strep throat, however, your child can re-infect herself with the same germs that got her sick in the first place. In that case, tossing the toothbrush protects both the child and the rest of the family.

6. Banish secondhand smoke. Parents that smoke shall quit the habit. Cigarette smoke contains more than 4,000 toxins, most of which can irritate or kill cells in the body, says Beverly Kingsley, Ph.D., an epidemiologist with the Office on Smoking and Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Kids are more susceptible than adults to the harmful effects of secondhand smoke because they breathe at a faster rate; a child's natural detoxification system is also less developed. Secondhand smoke increases a child's risk of SIDS, bronchitis, ear infections, and asthma. It may also affect intelligence and neurological development. If parents absolutely can't quit smoking, they can reduce their kids' health risks considerably by smoking only outside the house, Dr. Kingsley says.

7. Don't pressure your pediatrician. Urging a pediatrician to write a prescription for an antibiotic whenever one's child has a cold, flu, or sore throat is a bad idea. Antibiotics treat only illnesses caused by bacteria, “but the majority of childhood illnesses are caused by viruses,” says Howard Bauchner, M.D., a professor of pediatrics and public health at the Boston University School of Medicine.

Studies show, however, that many pediatricians prescribe antibiotics somewhat reluctantly at the urging of parents who mistakenly think it can't hurt. In fact, it can. Strains of antibiotic-resistant bacteria have flourished as a result, and a simple ear infection is more difficult to cure if it's caused by stubborn bacteria that don't respond to standard treatment. Whenever the pediatrician wants to prescribe an antibiotic, parents shall make sure she isn't prescribing it solely because she thinks the parents want it. “I strongly encourage parents to say, ‘Do you think it's really necessary?’” “Dr. Bauchner says. (www.parents.com)