- Immune system

Keep your motor running

AUTUMN'S THE IDEAL TIME FOR A HEALTH MOT, BY CAMILLA FOSTER

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STARTING to feel increasingly mentally and physically drained as the days grow shorter? You aren't alone. "This time of year is a perfect storm for illnesses because we've got reduced sunlight that leads to lower vitamin D levels, which is essential for immune function," explains Dr Elise Dallas, GP at The London General Practice. "Also, the environment gets colder and the air gets drier, so mucous membranes in the nose and the throat, which are the body's first defence system, get less good at fighting the airborne viruses." Here are eight easy expert-backed ways to conduct an autumn health MOT to reset your body and boost your health for the chillier months ahead...



1. BOOK ROUTINE HEALTH CHECKS 5. MANAGE STRESS LEVELS

"Many people notice that stress and low mood feel more intense during the winter months. Shorter days, colder weather and increased seasonal pressures can all combine to affect both mental and physical wellbeing," says Dr Zemenides Dr Dallas adds: "Stress puts our body into fight-or-flight mode, and if that happens all the time it can impact our immune systems. So, just putting aside 10 minutes a day to calmly connect with yourself can be really beneficial." Try apps like Calm, she says.

The better your health is going into winter, the better prepared you are to fend off infection Dr Michael Zemenides

"Book any overdue reviews for things like blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes and thyroid," recommends Dr Michael Zemenides, cofounder of the A-Z General Practice at The Wellington Hospital, in London. "If you have a long-term condition, schedule your annual review and ensure prescriptions are current. The better your health is going into the winter months, the better prepared you are to fend off infection."

2. STAY HYDRATED

"Stay hydrated because our mucous membranes need to stay wet to be able to fight infections," says Dr Dallas. "Most people don't tend to drink enough water but you need all of those fluids to fight off infections and to experience less brain fog.

“Try to prioritise having a couple of pints of water before you leave the house every morning, and if you don’t like the taste of water you can add ingredients like ginger or mint to it.”

3. GET YOUR VACCINATIONS

“Protect yourself – and those around you – with flu and Covid-19 vaccinations if you’re eligible,” says Dr Zemenides. “These reduce the risk of serious illness and hospitalisation during peak season. To find out if you qualify, speak to your GP or pharmacist.

4. PRIORITISE SLEEP

“Longer hours of darkness can confuse the body’s natural rhythm, leading to disrupted or excessive sleep,” says Dr Zemenides. “Poor sleep quality affects emotional balance, concentration and resilience to stress.”

“Try to aim for at least seven, eight or nine hours of sleep every night and try to get to sleep before midnight,” advises Dr Dallas.

6. TAKE MORE VITAMIN D

Our levels of vitamin D tend to dip in the colder months, so supplements can help. “Between October to March, consider 10 micrograms (400 IU) daily of vitamin D and try to also include dietary sources by eating things like oily fish, eggs and fortified foods,” recommends Dr Zemenides.

7. BE ACTIVE OUTDOORS

“Exercise is a natural stress-reliever, helping the body to manage cortisol and improve sleep and mood,” says Zemenides. “In winter, colder temperatures and shorter days often reduce outdoor activity, which can contribute to higher stress levels and tension. So, try to stay active - even short daily walks can lift mood.”

8. EAT IMMUNE-BOOSTING FOODS

“Favour immune-supportive foods such as leafy greens, root veg, squash, berries, lean protein, whole grains and healthy fats,” recommends Dr Zemenides.