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# 4 Immune-Boosting Tips From an Integrative Medicine Expert

Preserving your well-being in a pandemic, from the Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine



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While many scientists and researchers are fervently searching for the critical, targeted antiviral or anti-inflammatory approach that will effectively treat people who become ill with Covid-19, the disease caused by

the novel coronavirus, not to mention a vaccine to prevent it altogether, a third strategy seeks to make people less susceptible to the infection to begin with.

In traditional Chinese medicine, the highest form of praise is reserved for medicines that have nonspecific effects — in other words, remedies that broadly improve a person's overall well-being. The lowest form of a medicine, by contrast, is said to have a specific effect on a specific problem. This emphasis on supporting broad well-being is a major underlying principle of integrative medicine.

Defined as healing-oriented medicine that takes account of the whole person, integrative medicine considers all aspects of a patient's lifestyle. It is an evidence-based approach that emphasizes the therapeutic relationship between practitioner and patient and makes use of all appropriate therapies. Let me parse the definition of integrative medicine with specific regard to the unique challenges posed by the coronavirus.

“Healing-oriented” reflects a commitment to do all that is possible to help a person heal more effectively. As such, many integrative medicine recommendations rest squarely in the realm of healthy lifestyle — which turns out to be critically important in this pandemic.

Aside from the elderly, most people who succumb to the virus have coexisting conditions such as hypertension, obesity, and diabetes. These chronic diseases are highly correlated with unhealthy lifestyles. Indeed, it has been estimated that 90% of cardiovascular deaths could be prevented if Americans adhered to four preventive health recommendations (not smoking, maintaining a body mass index of <25, engaging in regular physical activity, and eating a healthy diet) and maintained healthy levels of three biomarkers (cholesterol <200, blood pressure <120/<80, and blood sugar <100).

Although we are far from a proven approach to prevention when it comes to the coronavirus, we do know that the overall health of the immune system is a critical variant. The faculty of the Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine recently examined the scientific literature for the very best evidence and published a paper recommending key integrative approaches for coronavirus risk reduction.

## Get enough sleep

Our first recommendation is adequate sleep. Sleep has a significant impact on how well the immune system functions. A persistent lack of sleep (defined as a week of fewer than five hours per night) has been associated with a 450% increased risk of becoming ill when exposed to a virus that causes the common cold. And sufficient sleep is one of the factors that determines whether your immune system responds to an annual flu vaccine by producing antibodies. As we all eagerly await a vaccine, we also need to take every measure within reach to shore up the lifestyle factors that make a vaccine perform well.

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## Reduce stress

Our second broad recommendation is stress management. Stress increases our risk of getting all kinds of sicknesses, from the most basic respiratory infection to cancer. We all have different strategies to reduce stress — the critical guidance here is to practice those strategies regularly. The goal is to effectively wire your nervous system so that it easily shifts into relaxation mode. Whether you enjoy yoga, tai chi, long walks, guided imagery, meditation, or deep breathing, the important point is to turn them into a practice by engaging in one or more daily.

## Eat well

As we know, food matters. What we eat can literally change the inflammatory milieu of the body. This is the rationale behind the anti-inflammatory (AI) diet. Consuming omega-3 fatty acids from fish, keeping our blood sugar from spiking by avoiding processed food and simple carbs, and eating lots of vegetables and fruits are the foundations of the AI diet. Some specific vegetables and fruits are particularly adept as antioxidants and anti-inflammatory agents; these include onions, garlic, parsley, celery,

apples, tomatoes, oranges, nuts, and berries. Spices such as curcumin and the epigallocatechin-3-gallate (EGCG) found in green tea are also potent.

## Consider targeted supplements

Lastly, we recommend a selection of dietary supplements, including zinc, vitamins C and D, melatonin, and elderberry, for prevention. Based on studies of previous coronaviruses, we know that these supplements work by reducing a virus's ability to enter the cell, attach, or replicate, or by reducing inflammation.

If you get infected with Covid-19, we caution against a few supplements with immune-stimulating properties, such as elderberry and vitamin D, that could theoretically exacerbate cytokine storm. Finally, should you become infected, we suggest supplements that have scientific evidence supporting their use; these include quercetin, astragalus, andrographis, and zinc.

To be sure, none of these supplements (with the exception of intravenous vitamin C and zinc, for which trials are now in progress) have been studied in relation to Covid-19. Our center plans to run a trial, and we are developing the protocol now. In the meantime, East Virginia Medical School is recommending a similar supplement regimen.

While we await results from studies, let us remember the wisdom inherent in medicines — or lifestyle practices — that build up our overall well-being. Eat well, sleep well, find a way to center and quiet yourself, and consider the value of select dietary supplements. These behaviors cannot guarantee that you won't get infected, but they may well reduce the likelihood that you get sick and similarly may help you overcome illness with greater ease.

## How to begin

If following these lifestyle guidelines is new to you, be gentle with yourself as you begin. Some changes will be easy, such as adding vitamin D to your daily regimen. Others will require more effort, such as saying no to simple carbs. Anthropologist Margaret Mead famously said, "It is easier to change a man's religion than his diet."

Yet, as an integrative medicine physician, I have frequently witnessed people make significant changes to bolster their well-being. Add a salad to your daily lunch — a big salad will provide four to five servings of vegetables. Listen to a three-minute guided meditation on one of the many available mindfulness apps. Divorce yourself from screens for 60 minutes or more before bed. Expect to begin and then lose track. Simply begin again. This is how we develop new healthy habits.

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