

Home > Health > Immune Boosters

Health

Immune Boosters

Healthy habits can help fend off COVID-19 and more. Here are some suggestions from local health experts for increasing your resilience.

By **Cathy Cassinos-Carr** · March 22, 2021

Facebook Twitter Pinterest



Understandably, 2021 may be remembered as the year of the vaccine. But it's only one tool in the battle against COVID-19.

Though we tend to take it for granted when it's in good working order, the tool known as the immune system is at the very heart of wellness, helping to both prevent and fight disease. One local doctor likens it to a house alarm, protecting us from harm.

"If you have protection around the house, there's less damage when the burglar comes through," says Rajiv Misquitta, M.D., an internal medicine physician and medical director of the department of lifestyle medicine at Kaiser Permanente South Sacramento. While COVID is the "burglar" people may currently be most concerned about, Misquitta says, a healthy immune system can help guard against all illness, from diabetes to heart disease to the common cold.

Misquitta and other local experts offer these tips for keeping your immune system strong.

- 1. Don't be sleepless in Sacramento. (Or Roseville.)** Sleep doesn't earn the No. 1 spot here for nothing. Some experts believe catching your zzz's—consistently—may be the most important immune-boosting step of all. "The importance of good sleep tends to get overshadowed by all these other big, shiny topics," says Revée Barbour (aka "Dr. Ray"), N.D., a naturopathic doctor in private practice in Sacramento. "Your immune system won't be where it can be without proper sleep. Sleep is the time our body is able to effectively and efficiently regenerate cells and detoxify." Inflammation, anxiety and depression are among the issues that can zoom out of control when we're not getting enough rest, says Barbour. Research also shows that people who lack sufficient sleep are more likely to get sick after being exposed to a virus, which is not only worrisome in COVID times, but any time.

The National Sleep Foundation recommends adults log seven to nine hours a night, but most are likely not getting it these days. A majority of respondents said they were having more trouble sleeping since COVID quarantining began, according to a survey conducted last year by Leesa (yes, the mattress manufacturer). So, what to do about it? In addition to scaling back on screen time and following other sleep hygiene rules (visit sleepfoundation.org for a full list), Barbour recommends chamomile tea ("it can really help if you're under stress") and magnesium, helpful for sleep, mood and metabolism. "Magnesium is good for strengthening your immune system, and it gets very quickly depleted when you're under stress," she says. A nightly dose of 200–500 milligrams of magnesium chelate, glycinate or citrate is safe for most, says Barbour—but ask your doctor.

- 2. Hit the farmers market.** What's that got to do with your immune system? Hint: All those fabulously fresh fruits and veggies, full of antioxidants and other nutrients. "At the farmers market, you'll find vegetables and fruits you're not familiar with, and it's fresh and healthy—it hasn't been sitting in a refrigerator for several days," says Kaiser's Misquitta. Farmers markets are not just a warm-weather thing; a number of Sacramento-area markets operate year-round, even when COVID restrictions are in place. (Get the deets at california-grown.com.) A vegan himself, Misquitta advocates strongly for a whole-foods, plant-based diet, but he knows it isn't for everyone. For those who'd rather pile on the mac 'n' cheese than the macrobiotics, he suggests this: Fill half your plate with vegetables. By taking just this one step, Misquitta says, "you'll make a big boost in your health."

Also: Keep it colorful. "Look for the brightly colored fruits and vegetables," suggests Barbour, rattling off a long list of foods rich in vitamin C and antioxidants, including leafy greens, berries, kiwi, broccoli and citrus fruits, and Vitamin A boosters such as squash, carrots, sweet potatoes, pumpkin and bell peppers. "All of these are really helpful for the gut system, and your gastrointestinal tract is a big key to having a healthy immune system," says Barbour.

If you can't—for whatever reason—eat all those fruits and veggies, try a whole food-based multivitamin, hit a juice bar or consider nutritional IV therapy, suggests Barbour. "But," she warns, "there is no alternative to eating healthy." Stress eaters, alert: This also means cutting back on the carbs, sweets and alcohol. (Sorry.)

- 3. Move that body.** You knew it was coming: You've gotta move your body, even just a little. Rolling out of bed and sitting in front of the computer—an easy habit to get into during these work-at-home times—just won't cut it, says Misquitta. "Our lives are pretty sedentary, and with the COVID epidemic, there's even less activity," he says. While it's easy for him to say (in addition to being a doctor, Misquitta is a certified personal trainer and yoga instructor), he reminds us that exercise—along with items 1 and 2—is essential to staying healthy and building a strong immune system, one that can help you stave off all kinds of illnesses including, but certainly not limited to, COVID-19.

Granted, not everyone can put in 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity exercise, the minimum recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. So Misquitta offers this: How about four-second bursts? Misquitta excitedly shared the results of a new study from the University of Texas at Austin, which showed that four seconds of intense exercise (in this case, a sprint on a stationary bike), repeated throughout the day, can lower triglycerides, burn fat and help to undo the damaging effects of a sedentary life. But the keys here are *intense* short bursts, frequently repeated. "That's my best suggestion: To stay active throughout the day," Misquitta says.

If you're working from home most of the time and exercise-challenged, Misquitta recommends these simple steps: Stand up once an hour and stretch, take a walk, do wall pushups, or simply march in place. "You don't need fancy equipment, you don't need to go to a gym, and you don't have to pay for it," he says. "The truth is, it's really very easy."

- 4. Unleash your creativity.** "In creativity there is a carefreeness," says Rosa Di Lorenzo, Psy.D, a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Sacramento. "Even on a biochemical level, doing something creative helps to discharge stress." Not an "arty" type? You don't need to be. Creativity is all about using your imagination and self-expression, whether you're painting, cooking, playing an instrument or simply dancing in front of the TV. Even just journaling can help: One University of Auckland study found that immune-compromised HIV patients who wrote about life experiences in four 30-minute sessions had increased levels of CD4 lymphocytes, a gauge of immune functioning.

Still not sure how to tap into your creativity? "Ask yourself what you loved to do as a child," suggests Di Lorenzo. "Even if you had a traumatic childhood, we all remember what it felt like to play and engage, to have fun."

- 5. Try meditation—even if you think you can't.** If your brain is a hamster on a wheel, as mine often is, the mere suggestion of meditation is laughable—like dreaming the impossible dream. But try telling that to Di Lorenzo. "I don't believe you can't meditate," she says. "I hear that all the time." A longtime practitioner herself, Di Lorenzo believes it's especially important to meditate now, given the enormous collective stress we've been carrying throughout the pandemic. "Meditation is like taking a mental shower," she says. "It resets the nervous system."

While the calming effects of meditation are kind of a no-brainer, it can also enhance your health in more tangible ways, and more quickly than you might think. A recent study from Michigan Technological University found that even a single session of mindfulness meditation not only reduced participants' anxiety, but also offered cardiovascular benefits. But that's not to suggest that once is enough. The greatest benefits come from consistent practice, says Di Lorenzo, who recommends 20 minutes daily, preferably in the morning. And if you can't commit to that? "At least try to start the day by checking your breath, check what's happening with the body, and move into a position of acceptance," she suggests. "That opens the way to a different way to relate to what's about to happen the rest of the day."

Di Lorenzo was about to launch an online mindfulness meditation and stress reduction course at the time of this writing. For updates, visit drrasadilorenzo.com. The Sacramento Buddhist Meditation Group (sbmg.org) has also been offering online meditation classes, including introductory courses for newbies.

- 6. Make room for Zoom.** When the holidays rolled around last winter, Di Lorenzo, like many, could not spend them with her family. "My family is in Italy, and I couldn't go there," she says. "I've been struggling like everyone else." While socializing during a pandemic lockdown is "a paradox," she says, "it is essential for us to connect with loved ones and friends. We are social beings." Research shows social connectedness not only shrinks stress and expands happiness, but also—you guessed it—helps to strengthen the immune system. It's even associated with longevity.

While connecting safely during the pandemic requires a little creativity and flexibility, social distancing does not have to mean social isolation, as Di Lorenzo reminds us. "Even if we cannot connect physically, we can connect in other ways—phone, Zoom, texting," she says. Di Lorenzo herself has had to shift most of her client therapy sessions online during the COVID crisis. If she can Zoom, so can you.

- 7. Focus on what works.** Yeah, yeah, yeah: "Stay positive." If you've ever tried telling that to someone (or even just tried telling it to yourself), you already know those two little words typically aren't all that helpful. Instead, suggests Di Lorenzo, "The point is to control what you can. And do not intend to control what you can't." Barbour concurs, offering this example. "You might be irritated about people who aren't wearing masks. But you can wear *your* mask; you can make sure to wash your hands regularly and practice your own *health* behaviors." By focusing on what you *can* control and on what works, you can begin moving into a more positive frame of mind.

But can a glass-half-full attitude actually improve the immune system? Studies show it can, making it just as important as items 1 to 6 on this list. Presumably, it also makes us more pleasant to be around—and that's just as good a reason to try it.

TAGS COVID-19 Immune Boosters Kaiser Permanente National Sleep Foundation Rajiv Misquitta Rosa Di Lorenzo

Like 39

Facebook Twitter Pinterest

Previous article [Throw the Axe](#) Next article [COVID-19: By the Numbers 3/22/21](#)

RELATED ARTICLES MORE FROM AUTHOR

- It's Working Out Cosmetic Surgery: 10 Local Trends Cryotherapy: Cold as Ice



Events Calendar

« JULY 2023 »						
M	T	W	T	F	S	S
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	1	2	3	4	5	6

- FRI 28 A Taste of the Delta Tasting Tour**
April 15 @ 11:30 am - December 31 @ 3:30 pm
- FRI 28 Exhibit It! A Community Art Exhibit**
July 5 @ 11:30 am - August 18 @ 5:00 pm
- FRI 28 "Meow Meow Meow" The Cat, Wild and Domestic.**
July 7 - July 31
- FRI 28 Slice: A Juried Exhibit of Regional Art 2023**
July 11 @ 11:30 am - August 20 @ 5:00 pm
- FRI 28 Geeks Who Drink Trivia Night at The Flamingo House Social Club**
July 17 @ 8:00 pm - September 25 @ 10:00 pm

FOLLOW US

18,633 Fans **21,534** Followers **65,859** Followers

ABOUT US



Sacramento Magazine offers endless ideas for things to do in beautiful Sacramento. Whether you are looking for food and drink, arts and culture, events or tourist attractions, Sacramento Magazine is the perfect guide to all that is happening in the region.

FOLLOW US