

A mindful approach to immunity

The immune system requires balance in both your mind and body in order to function well. Luckily, there are many nourishing practices that focus on the relationship between your mind, body and behaviour, and the effect on your overall wellbeing.

Words EMMA NUTTALL

Illustration Getty Images



To function well, the immune system requires balance in both the mind and body. The food you choose to eat, the way you move your body, your thoughts, emotions and your stress response all influence the body's ability to fight infection, recover from illness and come back into a state of balance.

Your mental state can have a profound influence on your physical health. Unfortunately, stress is a constant issue for many people due to the current pace of life. You are continuously processing information from various sources and may find yourself frequently rushing and striving to get everything done. As a result, you may not be providing your mind and body with adequate time to rest.

Your body responds to overwhelming stimulus by activating the sympathetic nervous system. Stress activates your amygdala, which is the part of the limbic system that acts as your brain's threat radar. This triggers the fight-or-flight response, which involves a sequence of hormonal and physiological reactions that affect your heart rate, blood chemistry and immune system.

Long-term stress can leave your body in a hypervigilant state. When your sympathetic nervous system is constantly activated, your body spends less time in the rest-and-digest state that is governed by the parasympathetic nervous system. Chronically raised stress hormones can negatively impact brain function and gut health, and lead to inflammation and a range of health conditions.

Mind-body practices

Fortunately, there are many mind-body practices that can build your resilience to stress, calm your nervous system and strengthen your immune response. Mind-body practices focus on the relationship between mind, body and behaviour and the effect on your overall wellbeing.

The first step in strengthening the mind-body connection is to spend time mindfully observing your thoughts, physical symptoms and reactions. By listening to your body and understanding when your sympathetic nervous system is triggered, you can employ simple practices to slow down your breathing, reduce the cascade of stress hormones and, in time, reverse the negative effects on your immune health.

Practising mindfulness

There is truth in the saying "we are what we think". Thoughts lead to feelings and feelings lead to behaviours. Your thought patterns not only govern your behaviour, they also have a significant influence on your stress response. During challenging times, it's common to experience fear and anxiety about future events. Catastrophising is a type of distorted thinking that involves conjuring up the worst possible scenario. Unhelpful or

distorted thinking leads to distorted feelings that may trigger stress and anxiety. Mindfulness teaches us to focus on the present moment, using the breath as an anchor. With each breath, remind yourself that you are safe, right here, right now, in this moment.

Breathwork

Deep-belly breathing calms the nervous system and reduces stress levels by switching off the fight-or-flight response. When you breathe deeply into your belly so that your diaphragm contracts, you increase the amount of oxygen that enters your body. Increased oxygen levels mean your heart doesn't need to pump as fast. As you continue to breathe deeply, your heart rate and stress hormone levels reduce.

Meditation

Countless research studies have validated the health benefits of meditation. The relaxation response that is achieved through meditation may be the main mechanism for increased immune activity, however studies have also measured increases in various white blood cells and reduced inflammatory markers.

Visualisation, or guided imagery, is a form of mediation that harnesses the mind-body connection. Just as negative thoughts can trigger a physiological stress response within your body, visualisation can influence chemical messages that reduce stress hormones and stimulate the immune response.

Guided imagery for immune health can be found on meditation apps such as Insight Timer. They can range from focusing specifically on increasing immune-cell activity to visualising healing light entering your body.

Food as medicine

A food-as-medicine approach to healthy eating can have a significant influence on immune health. Zinc and vitamin C are important nutrients for immune function and can be obtained from a diet that is high in vegetables, fruit and wholefoods. Zinc can be obtained from foods including oysters, pumpkin seeds and broccoli. Red capsicum, kiwi fruit and citrus fruits are high in vitamin C.

Vitamin D's role in immune function is also well documented. Around 10-15 minutes of daily sunshine exposure is required for adequate vitamin D levels, and supplementation is often recommended during winter months or in colder climates.

Eating a wholefoods diet that contains a diverse range of plant food also supports immunity by controlling inflammation and promoting a healthy gut microbiome. Supporting the health of your gut is integral to immune function, as this is where a significant amount of your lymphatic tissue is contained.



Illustration Getty Images



Movement

Moderate-to-low-intensity exercise is effective in calming the nervous system while increasing blood and lymphatic circulation. Slow, deliberate, meditative movements bring awareness back to the body, thereby increasing the connection with the mind. Consider yoga, tai chi and walking meditation.

Laughter Yoga

Laughter is an evidence-based therapy for stress reduction and immune support. Studies into humour and laughter demonstrate that by activating neural pathways that generate positive emotions, laughter can lower your physical and emotional response to stress.

I recently had the pleasure of attending a laughter class with Laughter Yoga Australia. The instructor took us through exercises designed to mimic the natural physical response of laughter. The forced laughter ("ha ha ha, ho ho ho") and self-conscious giggles soon turned to authentic laughter. The positive, relaxed feeling I had at the end of the session stayed with me for the rest of the day.

Cold-water therapy

Over the past few years there has been a great deal of interest in cold-water therapy as

a tool for nervous system regulation. Studies show that regular exposure to cold water for short periods of time builds resilience by teaching your body to better handle stressors.

As a person prone to anxiety and overwhelm, I have been working on increasing my resilience to stress. After reading about the Wim Hof Method, I introduced cold-water therapy into my routine. After two months of daily three-five-minute cold showers, I am more energised and alert, and feel like I am gaining greater control over my stress response.

Restorative sleep

Deep, restorative sleep is essential to immune health. Your body's processes slow down during sleep, providing your immune system with more energy to fight infection. Your cells undergo repair processes, and your brain removes waste while you are sleeping. Studies have shown inflammatory markers to be higher in people who are not getting enough sleep.

Sleep hygiene practices such as reducing blue light exposure, winding down prior to bedtime, regular exercise and stress relief can all contribute to improving the quality of your sleep.

Integrative therapies

For deeper work, there is a range of mind-body practices you can undertake with trained professionals. These include modalities such as hypnosis, biofeedback, neuro-linguistic programming and certain psychological therapies. Different mind-body practices work for different people, and it can be useful to trial different modalities to discover what you connect with and get the best response from.

For me, nutrition, sleep, movement and meditation are fundamental in supporting my wellbeing. Over the past two years, I have also explored Laughter Yoga, cold-water therapy and had regular sessions with a psychologist. I have noticed a significant reduction in my stress response since early 2020. I plan to continue to explore more of the tools and techniques available to assist in regulating my nervous system and strengthening my immune response. 🧘

Emma Nuttall is a nutritionist (BHSc) and freelance writer. She combines evidence-based nutritional medicine with mindset strategies to support her clients in achieving their goals. W: healthservedup.com; IG: [@healthservedup](https://www.instagram.com/healthservedup)