

**Balancing Your Immune System
For Optimal Health
by Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD**

All living beings must recognize what is “self” and what is “non-self” in order to maintain a unique and separate identity within the biosphere. In complex beings such as humans, this is carried out by the coordinated group of organs, cells and chemical substances known as the “immune system.”

Our immune balance is controlled by hormones secreted by the brain, thymus, adrenals and other glands, which regulate the production and activity of the many types of immune cells. These inhabit mucous membrane surfaces in the digestive and respiratory tracts and also move throughout the body, encountering and eliminating that which they perceive as non-self. In addition, the liver, kidney and lymphatic organs of elimination are crucial in clearing toxins from the body which otherwise could contribute to immune imbalance.

Together, all these body systems form a web or sixth sense that governs the interface between our internal and Gaia’s external environments. It allows our physical bodies to accept and assimilate what we need to thrive, while rejecting or transforming that which is harmful.

All aspects of our life experiences, including spiritual, emotional, nutritional and environmental factors influence immune balance. For example, when we experience severe or chronic stress, isolation or bereavement, our immune function is generally depressed. This can lead to reduced resistance to infections and cancers. Or, when one’s personality is overly rigid or expression of the inner self is blocked, chronic inflammations leading to arthritis may occur. On the other hand, when one is involved in loving relationships and has found satisfying work, immune balance is strengthened. Regular exercise and stress reduction techniques also can improve immune function.

Immune function is also strongly influenced by dietary factors. In infancy, breast feeding is very important in developing proper immune balance. Later on, eating a diet of whole foods grown on vital, mineral rich soil that is gently prepared so as to preserve nutritional content enhances immune balance and general health. Conversely, a diet low in nutrients and high in toxins and chemically altered foods may result in nutritional deficiencies, allergies, and immune imbalance. Environmental factors, including toxic exposures, water, air and noise pollution as well as smoke and other irritants can also weaken or unbalance immunity. In addition, improper use of antibiotics can upset the body’s inner ecology of beneficial bacteria. Other recreational or prescribed drugs may weaken the liver, kidneys, digestive tract and other protective mucous membranes, again leading to immune imbalance.

Even at rest, the immune system is constantly watching for threats to the organism’s natural balance. When it identifies external invaders such as infectious organisms, immune cells are stimulated to neutralize the threat. This process, which manifests on the physical plane as

inflammation, generally results in healing and repair of the damage. Ideally, it's followed by a return of the immune cells to their resting, alert state and a new, harmonious balance.

The immune system must also identify and repair or eliminate mutated cells of the self. If, because of deficient immunity, these are not recognized, cancer may be the ultimate result. At the same time, the system must consistently avoid attacking cells of the self that are functioning normally. It must also allow the body to accept and assimilate beneficial "non-self" substances. These include nourishing foods, medicines, bacteria that help digestion or the foreign molecules responsible for such simple pleasures as the smell of flowers.

When the immune system inappropriately attacks the body's own cells, chronic auto-immune diseases can result. These include some types of arthritis, diabetes, psoriasis, ulcerative colitis, lupus and possibly heart disease. When it attacks harmless external substances, then chronic inflammations such as asthma, eczema, food allergies, hay fever and environmental sensitivities occur.

Some illnesses involve a mixture of deficient and excess immunity. These include chronic fatigue syndrome, rheumatic fever, chronic hepatitis and even acne.

The healer helping an individual with an immune imbalance must first recognize whether an immune deficiency, excess or mixed imbalance is present. Next, a partnership is formed, in which healer and patient work together to uncover the imbalances' causes. Only when these are revealed can one eliminate the root causes of disease, restoring balance and health.

For example, chronic pain, inflammation or allergies may be caused by inappropriate or excess immunity. If these symptoms are related to a food allergy or environmental sensitivity, an obvious solution is to identify and eliminate exposure to the offending substance. Sometimes its also necessary to strengthen the digestive system with a proper diet in order to regain immune balance. Alterative herbs may also be used to help eliminate inflammation causing toxins from the body. Alteratives include Burdock (*Arcticum lappum*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), Red Clover (*Trifolium praetense*) and many others.

One can tone down immune excess by supplementing the diet with Omega-3 fatty acids, found in cold water fish, and Omega-6 fatty acids, found in herbs such as Evening Primrose (*Oenothera biennis*) and Borage (*Borago officinalis*) oils. Or, anti-inflammatory bioflavonoids such as Quercetin and Bromelain may be taken as nutritional supplements. In addition, herbs such as Licorice Root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) or Curcumin (an extract of the spice Turmeric) work through the adrenal glands to balance immunity and reduce inflammation. Other herbs useful in reducing certain immune responses include Milkweed (*Aesclepius spp*), Devil's Claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*) and Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*).

Chronic or frequent bacterial, viral or yeast infections may be signs of reduced immunity. Often, identifying and correcting specific nutritional deficiencies will be helpful. Vitamins A, C and E and

the minerals zinc, magnesium and selenium (among others) have a major role in enhancing immunity. Stress-reducing techniques such as meditation and immune-focusing practices such as visualization and biofeedback may also be beneficial.

Numerous herbs have co-evolved with us to provide a variety of useful immune stimulating medicines. Some of the most important include Garlic, Ginseng (*Panax ginseng*), Astragalus (*Astragalus spp*) and Shitake mushrooms. These can be used either chronically as immune tonics or acutely to help with specific episodes of illness. Other immune enhancing herbs, such as Echinacea (*Echinacea spp*) are best used only for short periods during acute infections.

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. Anyone with symptoms that persist should consult a qualified health care practitioner. In cases of life-threatening illnesses such as cancer or AIDS these gentle remedies are often best combined with conventional medical treatments. However, the mindful use of herbal medicines specifically promotes a greater harmony between human culture and Mother Earth. Ultimately, it is this partnership that brings success to all healing endeavors.

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