
How can you **boost** your
immune system?



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+GUIDE TO GOOD HEALTH



Vendor Antonio Llewellyn sets his fruits on a stall in Black Rock, Tobago.

fruits and favourite household veggies like bodi, aloo etc, without the burden of flour. Your midday snack can be a smoothie or nuts, fresh fruits. It's about varying your diet into fresher vegetables and fruits as much as possible, as this is what healthy bacteria need to survive.

"Dietary diversity and microbial diversity go together, Dr Jacobs MD, PhD, a professor of digestive diseases at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA," says.

"The typical Western diet, which is high in animal proteins, sugar, processed foods and saturated fat, results in less-diverse gut bacteria and promotes inflammation and chronic disorders," he adds.

According to mixed levels of research, you may also consider that some herbs do assist immune function. Echinacea is a well-researched one, but there is growing interest in mushrooms like reishi, shiitake, maitake, turkey tail mushrooms and chaga, which are high in a component called Beta-D-glucans, which appear to be effective at enhancing immune function and reducing susceptibility to infection. Research in the role herbs play in the immune system continues.

Movement is also vital. For fit persons, exercise in any form contributes to a healthier overall immune system. Persons who face chronic illness may look to less intensive approaches like rebounding, which uses a small trampoline to stimulate movement linked to improving your lymphatic system's flow. Unlike the blood in your body, which is regulated by the heart as a pump, the lymphatic system needs you to move to be cleaned!

Quality sleep matters too, six to nine hours of the good kind.

Your emotions matter too.

Most people don't realise the impact their emotional well-being has on their immune system. Given that emotions have hormonal aspects, it stands to reason that living a healthy, emotional life matters significantly in having a healthy immune system too. Chronic (long term) stress has been associated in studies with a suppressed immune system. Activities that matter like social connection, having healthy, boundary-ruled relationships, open communication assist, as do activities like being engaged in healthy habits and hobbies or things that require mental and body alignments like yoga and meditation. The human brain needs ten minutes of 'sifting' for every hour of living, so even if you don't actively meditate, taking time to process your thoughts can help immensely.

The key to a healthy immune system is a purpose-driven, balanced life that engages in all the right inputs and limits toxic ones. It is far better to pursue a long-term approach to immune health than to try short term measures that can even be harmful or, at the least, simply costly.

Power up your immune system

KIERAN ANDREW KHAN

When we think of the immune system, if we think of it at all, we tend to think of some abstract organ that fights through cases of flu, fends off environmental hazards and toxins and keeps us primed and ready for our day ahead.

Few of us give it much thought unless we were faced with an illness. But that was before the current global pandemic where we now want to optimise it.

The system that keeps us immune

The primary components of the human immune system are white blood cells, antibodies, complement system, lymphatic system, spleen, bone marrow and thymus, but there are other components like your skin, lungs and digestive system. Regarding the latter, you will often hear people say that your immune system is in your gut and that your gut is your second brain. Both are roughly truer than you think.

According to David Heber, MD, PhD, professor emeritus of medicine at UCLA Health, "Seventy per cent of the immune system is located in the gut."

This is a primary and robust indicator that, firstly, what we consume in terms of our diet plays a huge role in modulating our immune system. Our human gut contains three



Customers select fresh produce at the Norris Deonarine Northern Wholesale Market, Macoya in this May file photo. Eating healthy, exercising, getting enough sleep and managing your emotional wellbeing all contribute to a healthy immune system. PHOTO BY AYANNA KINSALE

to five pounds of bacteria and other aspects like viruses and fungi, which altogether comprise the gut microbiome.

A healthy microbiome started in earlier life with the proper exposure in the right ways. For instance, some studies show babies born by C-section have a lower gut diversity than those delivered naturally through the birth canal.

There are also new insights into organs of your body, such as the appendix, previously and largely considered useless, which may be far from the truth. The appendix may act as a reservoir of good bacteria helping to repopulate your gut after a bout of food poison-

ing or too many beers and chicken wings. Persons who have had their appendix removed also tend to see increases in some potential gut diseases and decreases in others, reflecting some level of interaction between an appendix and a healthy gut.

So the science of a healthy gut and healthy you are only now becoming understood in the least.

Are there ways to boost your immune system?

While we are just learning new aspects of the system overall, there are well-documented ways

to keep and maintain or restore a healthy immune system.

Nutrition is the key. While we expect that vitamin C is the critical player in immune health, the nutrition picture is much bigger and banks heavily on diversity.

Consuming a more comprehensive array of fruits and vegetables, particularly with fibre and not juiced, eating with the seasons and purchasing from farmers' markets all play a crucial role in helping to diversify your gut bacteria. That does not mean putting vegetables alongside sides like sada roti or rice, but having meals driven by fruits and vegetables instead.

A healthy breakfast can be fresh

What breastfeeding mothers, pregnant women should know about covid19 vaccines

CAROL QUASH

Breast milk has always been considered the healthiest food for babies because it contains proteins, fats, sugars and antibodies which support a baby's immune system. But with uncertainty surrounding the risks involved with covid19 and the vaccines that have been developed to build immunity against it, there has been concern as to whether or not lactating mothers and pregnant women should be vaccinated.

To date, the government of TT has secured doses of the Oxford AstraZeneca and Sinopharm vaccines in its vaccination drive, both of which require two shots for maximum efficacy.

Sinopharm is an inactivated virus vaccine, made from viral particles produced in a lab. The vaccine is used to "infect"



According to Dr Shevon Joseph, medical director and consultant physician at Azalea Health Services, there has not yet been approval in TT for pregnant women to get any of the available covid19 vaccines.

PHOTO TAKEN FROM HEALTH.CLEVELANDCLINIC.ORG

cells with covid19 so the body can trigger protective immunity to it.

Other vaccines such as the injectable polio, hepatitis A and flu vaccines use similar platforms.

The Oxford AstraZeneca is a non-replicating viral vector that introduces a safe, modified version of the virus to deliver a genetic code for the antigen. Once the body's cells are "infected", the cells are instructed to produce a large number of antigens, which in turn

trigger an immune response.

On June 28, director of women's health for the Ministry of Health, Dr Adesh Sirjusingh said the National Immunisation Technical Advisory Group had approved the Sinopharm vaccine for use by breastfeeding mothers. He said there was not enough information on the AstraZeneca vaccine to allow for its approval.

"It (Sinopharm) is really a killed form of the original virus and we have used this technology a lot in the past, including in the development of the influenza vaccines which

we already use in pregnancy, so we did have a lot more leeway when it came to approving it," Dr Sirjusingh said.

Dr Shevon Joseph, medical director and consultant physician at Azalea Health, a Woodbrook-based clinic that provides gynaecological healthcare, said the risk of covid19 transmission from ingestion of breast milk is still unclear but the benefits of breastfeeding remain.

She said numerous vaccines have been evaluated for prevention of covid19, but because of the increased risk of severe infections asso-



In TT, the Sinopharm covid19 vaccine has been approved for breastfeeding women. PHOTO TAKEN FROM HEALTHLINE.COM

ciated with pregnancy, pregnant and lactating women were excluded from many of these trials.

She said locally, there is yet no approval on any vaccine for pregnant women because while the Sinopharm and AstraZeneca are safe for the general population, pregnant women fall in a specific category within which special considerations are given before a vaccine could be approved for them.

Women who may be planning to have children, she said, have the option of deferring active attempts to conceive until after they have been fully vaccinated, since data on the risks during pregnancy is still very limited. But, she said, locally, "If an individual becomes pregnant after receiving the first dose of a two-dose covid19 vaccine series, the second dose

should be administered at the same time specified by the manufacturer for non-pregnant persons," providing it is the Sinopharm vaccine.

"This is what is happening internationally. If a woman gets pregnant between vaccines, as long as it is one that is approved for pregnancy and lactating mothers, she is given the second shot. The Sinopharm vaccine is developed using technology commonly used for other known vaccines, including the influenza vaccines, which we already give to pregnant women," she said.

Joseph said the US Centre for Disease Control (CDC) is advising all pregnant women to get vaccinated, especially those who are obese or with co-morbidities such as diabetes and hypertension. The US is using the two-dose Pfizer

and Moderna vaccines, as well as the one-dose Janssen covid19 vaccine (Johnson & Johnson) in its vaccination drive.

"The CDC's V-safe covid19 vaccine pregnancy registry has data on 827 completed pregnancies, mostly among people vaccinated in the third trimester, with no obvious safety signals with respect to miscarriage, congenital anomalies, foetal growth, preterm birth, stillbirth, or neonatal death," Joseph said.

Rare cases of thrombosis associated with thrombocytopenia, she said, have been reported following vaccination with both AstraZeneca and the Johnson & Johnson, with women being placed at higher risk than men.

"Women will have risks of blood clots at specific times such as during pregnancy, postpartum and while using hormonal contraceptive pills, and these factors must be considered."

The World Health Organization's (WHO) recommends the use of the covid19 vaccine in pregnant women "when the benefits of vaccination to the pregnant woman outweigh the potential risks. To help pregnant women make this assessment, they should be provided with information about the risks of covid19 in pregnancy, the likely benefits of vaccination in the local epidemiological context, and the current limitations of safety data in pregnant women."

The WHO also discourages women from terminating a pregnancy because of vaccination.



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Why continuous glucose monitoring is important

How to measure blood sugar levels

The goal for most people with diabetes is a 80-130mg/dL blood sugar level in the morning before eating as well as in between meals, if more than four hours have passed since the last meal.

It is normal for blood sugar to rise after eating. The goal is to keep it under 180mg/dL, one to two hours after the start of the meal, which is when blood sugar is expected to peak after eating.

These targets may be adjusted depending on a person's individual needs or risk of low blood sugar.

When blood sugar goes under 70mg/dL, this is considered low blood sugar or hypoglycemia. When it is above 180mg/dL, this is called high blood sugar or hyperglycemia.

Another measurement term, "time in range," is used to describe the per cent of glucose readings that are between 70-180mg/dL. The idea is that more time in range means a more consistent blood sugar level with less of highs and lows.

The recommendation for most people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes (that are targeting an A1C of less than seven per cent) is to achieve a time in range of 70 per cent or more. For people that are older or at higher risk of low blood sugar levels and have an A1C target of less than eight per cent, the target time in range is 50 per cent.

Blood sugar targets for most people with diabetes

These targets may be adjusted depending on a person's individual needs or risk of low blood sugar.

Monitoring blood sugar helps to determine if you are meeting your glucose targets which helps to reduce the unpleasant symptoms of high and low blood sugar, and avoid long-term diabetes complications. It is helpful to remember that the numbers are neither good nor bad. They are simply information used to help you learn what is working well and identify areas for improvement in your diabetes management.

Blood sugar monitoring is

Time	Target
Before Meals	80-130mg/dL
1-2 hours after meals	<180mg/dL
Time in range 70-180mg/dL	≥70%

WHAT IS A1C

The A1C blood test is a commonly used to diagnose type 1 and type 2 diabetes. For people living with diabetes, the test is also used to monitor how well blood sugar levels are being managed.

An A1C test result reflects a person's average blood sugar level for the previous two to three months. Specifically, the A1C test measures what percentage of haemoglobin proteins in the blood are coated with sugar (glycated). Haemoglobin proteins in red blood cells transport oxygen.

The higher the A1C level, the poorer the blood sugar control and the higher the risk of diabetes complications.

(mayoclinic.org)

important because A1C tests are only done every three to six months and reflect an average. Someone with an A1C in target could still have a lot of high and low blood sugar readings. That's the value and power of blood sugar monitoring. How often you check your blood sugar should be determined by you and your healthcare team.

Generally, people with type 1 diabetes or that take multiple daily injections of insulin or use an insulin pump, should check their blood sugar more frequently. They may check their blood sugar level before all meals and snacks, at bedtime, prior to exercise, prior to performing critical tasks like driving or any time they may suspect low blood sugar including after treating low blood sugar until blood sug-

ar has returned to 70mg/dL or higher. This can add up to 6-10 times/day, or can be done automatically through continuous glucose monitoring (CGM).

For people with type 2 diabetes who don't take insulin or take insulin once daily, monitoring blood sugar can help when adjusting the meal plan, physical activity or medications. For example, a person with type 2 diabetes may check once or twice per day alternating before meals and at bedtime, although some people choose to check more often.

What blood sugar levels mean

One strategy in glucose monitoring is to start by checking blood sugar levels before meals to see if you are achieving your targets. Once readings before a meal are at the target, you can check your blood sugar before a meal and again one to two hours after to see how that food directly affected your blood sugar level. This is called paired readings and can be tried with different meals and when introducing new activities.

Simply collecting numbers is not useful unless some type of action is also taken. Therefore, it is important to share the information with your healthcare team and regularly meet with a diabetes care and education specialist to learn how to take action and improve the time you spend in target range.

Blood glucose meters provide a blood sugar reading in a moment of time. If your blood sugar is rising or falling rapidly, BGM will often be more accurate in that moment. The use of a CGM requires wearing a sensor that checks blood sugar levels every one to five minutes, depending on the device. Continuous glucose monitoring provides more data points and helps to ease the burden of daily management.

The decision to use CGM instead of BGM should be determined with your healthcare team. Though cost and insurance coverage of CGM devices can sometimes be a barrier, there is an option to use a professional CGM, which is owned by the clinic and worn by the person with diabetes on a short-term, as-needed basis, up to 14 days, and typically two to four times per year.

Of course, you should check with your insurance plan first to confirm your options.

There are many benefits to blood sugar monitoring, particularly as you learn how your body uniquely responds to different factors. Blood sugar monitoring can help you achieve your glucose targets, increase your time in range, and feel your best while avoiding potential long-term complications from diabetes.

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In this October 2020 file photo, children ride bikes at West Park Savannah, Western Main Rd, Diego Martin. The covid19 pandemic has drastically changed life for children and teens who are also susceptible to anxiety and stress. PHOTO BY SUREASH CHOLAI

How to help children, teens keep a healthy mind

KIERAN ANDREW KHAN

The global pandemic demonstrated locally in two economic lockdowns and reinforced recently with a state of emergency has brought drastic changes to everyone's lives but one demographic in particular has seen major changes more than others: teens and children.

The landscape for these age groups has seen changes in how they attend school, how they interact with their peers and how active they are in their daily lives too. While adults generally would have still enjoyed some level of autonomy and movement in their daily lives, young adults and children would have seen a complete reversal from their previous lives.

Doubling down on all these changes are the ever present dangers of covid19 infection, bereavement, economic instability and a plethora of issues at home as well. Children in particular are also susceptible to the anxieties and stresses of their parents that they may not understand but yet still pick up on due to the economic situation in many homes across the country.

Signs of declining mental health

Loss of self-esteem and behavioural changes including loss of interest in hobbies or changes in appetite etc are some initial signs for teens and children. For teenagers, this can look more like moodiness, self mutilation, isolation, body image concerns and abandonment of friends and interests too.

On more severe levels this can also manifest as eating disorders and drug abuse, smoking and other rebellious behaviours. In many ways, initial signs are a silent plea for assistance and help.

How can we help them navigate?

Every situation is different and the critical thing is to support as best as you can as a parent or elder.

Keeping communication open is best but if your child doesn't have that type of relationship with you but does with a sibling or another close (and closely trusted) family member, then allow them to maintain that connection.

Recognising that teens and children have their own stressors is also key. Last week, Minister of Education, Dr Nyan Gadsby-Dolly tweeted, "It's a common temptation to invalidate someone else's stress. Like - "daiz wha you stressing bout? (sic) If you was in my position; wha you woulda do?" Hey... Even babies have stress....support where you can."

The minister posited the idea that we are all essentially stressed in one way or another and we all deal with things in the levels that we can, which looks different for everyone.

Understanding and communicating

that mental health disorders are treatable and not taboo in a household is key too. But perhaps the most important thing is to create a Chinese-wall of sorts between the stressors of what is happening globally and a safe space for children and teens in the home.

Children in particular are remarkably adaptive and once provided with a sense of security will adjust naturally. Teens may need more cajoling but ensuring that they are not too removed from the family unit at this time, or at least keep healthy relationships with their friends by way of digital connections, online gaming or other is helpful too. Finding a way to translate the pandemic to children in a way they can understand is also helpful.

Keep them active and mentally resilient

Given the dependency on digital for schooling and entertainment, limiting digital screen time for children is preferable. While parents always find that it provides the role of baby sitter at times, lengthy screen time not only means less physical activity but may also impact on children's circadian rhythms too. Keeping children active and stimulated with various challenges and tasks can range from the academic level to involvement in household chores can be done in fun ways. For those with yard space, getting out of the house or to a near park or outdoor green space is also helpful in grounding children if public health regulations allow.

For teens and children at this time, routine is also key - but with enough space and wiggle room so that neither feel stifled. But it helps to ensure better sleep routines when paired with healthy levels of physical activity. As the old adage goes, motion creates emotion. Some households may benefit from relaxing rules a bit however at this time too.

But before you begin creating a mentally resilient plan for your home, pause and consider as a parent, how is your mental health? Creating self-care routines for yourself can go a long way to allow parents and caregivers to become the kind of person they need to be for their children at this time. And while all of this may seem a bit heavy, the easiest way to create the kind of home that supports healthy mentalities is to be a fun one. Carve out time for family board games, video calls with other family members, lunch or dinners where everyone contributes or more. Laughter and joy is always a good place to start.

Of course there are times when professional assistance may be needed. Employed parents can consult their employers or insurance plans to see if there is coverage for mental health consults. The Ministry of Health offers a directory of mental health services by regional health authority at <https://health.gov.tt/services/mental-health>.



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Long covid can affect 10-20% of survivors

PAULA LINDO

Long covid, or post-covid syndrome, is a term used to describe a diverse set of symptoms that persist after a minimum of four weeks from the onset of a diagnosed covid19 infection, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Studies currently say that 10 to 20 per cent of covid19 survivors worldwide could experience long covid.

According to research conducted worldwide, most people who contract covid19 will recover between a month to two months after the onset of the disease. However, in patients who suffer from long covid, the symptoms can persist for months with no discernible end.

The American Association of Paediatricians said in July 2021 that children could also suffer from long covid and urged parents and physicians to monitor their patients and children.

A study of adult long covid patients – Characterizing Long Covid in an International Cohort – carried out by researcher Hannah Davis and a patient-led research collaborative and published by the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) in March 2021, found that these conditions included: systemic, neurological, gastrointestinal, pulmonary, dermatologic, immunologic/autoimmune, cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, reproductive/genitourinary/endocrine, and, head, ears, eyes, nose, throat (HEENT).

The study said the 25 most common symptoms were fatigue, post-exertional malaise, cognitive dysfunction or brain fog, shortness of breath, poor attention or concentration, tightness of chest, muscle aches, insomnia, heart palpitations, dizziness/vertigo/unsteadiness or balance issues, dry cough, difficulty thinking, short-term memory loss, tachycardia or rapid heartbeat, episodes of breathing difficulty/gasping for air with normal oxygen saturation, diarrhoea, sore throat, elevated temperature, anxiety, difficulty with executive functioning, chills/flushing/sweats, difficulty problem-solving or decision-making, pain/burning in chest, joint pain, loss of appetite.

Other serious symptoms were vision and hearing loss, facial paralysis and suicidality (12 per cent). Long covid also caused sexual dysfunction in men, women, and non-binary people, pain in testicles, decrease in male genital size, post-menopausal bleeding/spotting, early

menopause, and abnormal period.

The report noted that some treatment options were a pacing regimen, including no exercise for people with post-exertional malaise, testing for postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS) in people with problems with the autonomic nervous system (dysautonomia), along with use of compression garments and salt and electrolyte tablets; treatment of mast cell activation syndrome, a condition in which the patient experiences repeated episodes of the symptoms of anaphylaxis and other allergic symptoms, with histamine therapy.

It said many of the symptoms currently had no treatments.

Speaking on the BBC on July 12, professor of immunology at Imperial College London Danny Altmann said a team of scientists had been investigating long covid by analysing blood samples of those who have it to try to discover the cause.

In an article on CNBC, the team said they had found that irregular antibodies were common in blood samples of people suffering with long covid. They said the presence of these antibodies, which were not found in people who had recovered quickly from long covid, or had never had it, could lead to the development of a simple blood diagnostic test.

They said if autoantibodies are found, long covid could potentially be diagnosed, which could in turn help inform treatment and recovery plans for patients.

The phenomenon was first noted in TT in October 2020. Speaking at the Health Ministry's media conference, CMO Dr Roshan Parasram noted that individuals were exhibiting symptoms months after their initial diagnosis of covid19.

TT patients being monitored for symptoms

“What we are seeing is that persons can do what we thought just like any other virus, recover in one to two weeks and go back to full function. What we are seeing is individuals taking as much as three to four months to actually recover if they recover their full function at all. It is something that is evolving and only as time progresses will we be able to know the symptoms of long covid as we defined it.

“Shortness of breath and persistent fatigue is what we are seeing.”

The Health Ministry has said in media conferences that it continues to monitor covid19 patients to determine whether they are showing symptoms of long covid. An executive wellness clinic was set up at the Arima General

Hospital in October 2020 to treat people who were experiencing the effects of the syndrome.

Pulmonologist and covid19 consultant for the North Central Regional Health Authority (NCRHA) Dr Sana Mohammed said the clinic was conceptualised to manage patients who may experience long covid and require specialist input.

The clinic took the form of a once-a-week, whole-day assessment where patients are seen by a multi-disciplinary team aided by relevant investigations. The first clinic took place on October 6.

Mohammed said after the initial assessment, patients who required ongoing assessment would be seen three months, six months and one year after the initial assessment.

“If a patient needs immediate intervention, then they will be managed appropriately. For example, if they need examination under a cardiologist, for long-term heart complications following covid19 infection, then that will happen.

If they need long-term follow-up by a pulmonologist, where they might need chest X-rays or lung function tests, then that will also be arranged.”

On July 7, Trevor Khan, a covid19 survivor and long covid patient, shared his experience with the syndrome. He said he had initially been diagnosed with covid19 in October 2020 and had been treated at the Eric Williams Medical Complex. He said after recovering at home, he thought he was fine, but on December 31, he had a wave of dizziness, followed by a wave of symptoms such as dry cough, elevated body temperature, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, etc.

He said over the following months, he experienced more symptoms such as brain fog and vertigo as well as worsening of the original ones he had. He said after months of tests and treatments, he was feeling at about 90 per cent and was returning to normalcy. He said he was grateful to have gotten vaccinated as he had been dreading getting reinfected and urged others to do so.

Khan said one resource which had helped him tremendously was a survivors group he found online called Survivor Corps. It can be found on Facebook and at www.survivorcorps.com.

The website provides information on covid19, long covid, and other issues, and allows survivors to connect with each other.

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