

Building Immunity

by Todd Fiorentino

When someone says the word “immunity” nowadays, people most often think of the TV show “Survivor.” But as flu season approaches, I thought it would be a good idea to talk about ways to increase your immunity to disease (not the type that keeps you from being voted off an island). The critical mechanism of your body responsible for immunity is the lymphatic system, although the excretory system is also important. By keeping lymph moving in the body, you allow it to cleanse itself of bacteria, viruses, toxins and other impurities.

Though more common in parts of Europe, lymphatic drainage massage can be used to manually move this fluid through your body using pumping and stripping motions. Two of the major lymph ducts lie just above your armpits on the front of your body. If you have a persistent cold that won't seem to go away, you might try this option. But once you're already very sick, getting a massage, especially a lymphatic one, may just overload your system which is already fighting to process what's currently in the lymph nodes.

In the bad old days, there was less need for manual solutions because people used to walk barefoot. So getting your lymph moving wasn't a problem. By massaging the feet and hands -- working reflexology points -- we can naturally move lymph through the body. Pressing into these points can also stimulate and improve the functioning of internal organs. It feels good and increases your overall wellness.

Now more than ever, we are seeing an increase in diseases related to lowered or compromised immune systems. I believe that this is partly a symptom of poor lymph movement in the body due to a sedentary lifestyle and our culture of junk food and video games.

Even our whole foods have been zapped of nutrients, radiated, pumped with hormones, pesticides and chemical fertilizers. This degrades the soil, our earth. Degraded soil leads to less nutritious foods. Even the supplement manufacturers agree that getting those nutrients from vitamins is just not as good. And while we have fortified some foods like milk, it's not enough to counteract the trend in the opposite direction.

Prepare for (Micro) Battle

It is amazing that hundreds, maybe thousands, of micro-battles are currently underway in your body. Good bacteria... bad bacteria... the yeast-bacteria balance... it all gets very confusing. But here are a few things about immunity that I know for sure. Native American tribes used sweat lodges as the testing ground for young warriors. Partly rite of passage and partly of spiritual significance, sweat lodges were important culturally and health-wise. This is the link to the excretory system that I mentioned earlier. Sweating, through exercise or steaming, burns out the impurities in your body.

Lifestyle and cultural changes absolutely affect immunity. Aside from walking barefoot and sitting in sweat lodges, we used to work predominantly in farming, and then later, in manufacturing. Now, however, most jobs are service-oriented or technology-based. What does this mean? Well, that we're more sedentary; we're using our bodies

less; and that our society is becoming more cerebral and specialized. This all has implications in terms of our health. In the past, we were physically tired from work come day's end whereas now we're mentally exhausted and have to hit the gym to exert ourselves.

Our bodies need to be used. Even after surgery, physical therapy is generally advised because doctors recognize this fact. Some of the problems that massage therapists see in clients could be alleviated through increasing one's activity level and stretching. The results of massage and exercise are actually very similar—joints become lubricated and muscles fire leading to relaxation. I met someone recently who told me that she “outran fibromyalgia.” What an amazing thing! In fact, rest is really only prescribed after an injury; the acronym in the medical profession is RICE (Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation).

Nature, I find, can also heal and increase your immunity. Have you ever noticed that somehow you feel more refreshed and invigorated after running in the woods as opposed to on the treadmill? When running in a park, our body picks up dozens of natural cues every second. It is truly remarkable how many things we recognize, know, and are affected by on an unconscious level: the rustle of wind and leaves, the slow movement of clouds changing ever so slightly, twittering of birds, swaying of trees, crunch of frozen earth. It's feeding your spirit!

Food, inseparable from nature, is also medicine. We know that garlic and horseradish burn out impurities from your body, cleansing the liver. I have often noticed feeling charged-up after eating borscht (cold beet soup) and a potato kinish—two root crops. How the food is grown makes a difference. Does it sit in the earth slowly growing stronger throughout the season? Does it hang in the air on a branch? Root crops are powerful foods.

Miso soup is another potent yet mild food that I believe is medicine. (Who knows, maybe there is something more to mother's chicken soup than comfort...) Many yogurt brands have acidophillus, a bacterium that is good for your gut, especially after taking antibiotics. We know that coffee and alcohol zap your body of water, which is critical for softening tissues and reducing muscle spasm as well as maintaining healthy hydrated skin.

Your body knows just what it needs. Ever notice how citrus fruit suddenly looks enticing when you're starting to feel sick? Or how your muscles seem to cry out for protein? Listening to our cravings is the ultimate preparation for “micro-battle.”

Just Add Flower & Water

Well over 1/3 of drugs on the market were derived directly from nature. These drugs weren't created synthetically; they came from powerful organic material. While they may have been engineered in a lab, the active ingredient was out there all along. When I was in Ecuador, we were told stories of bio-prospectors from drug companies who had walked our same path in the Intag Cloud Forest looking for plants only weeks previous.

Interestingly, the cure to an ailment often grows alongside the cause, as is the case with jewelweed and poison ivy. To animals, poison ivy is just a nice native plant as they have fur coats to guard against its oils. But to humans, poison ivy is a nightmare unless

you know about its counterpart in nature. Jewelweed is just one of many powerful flowers.

So walk barefoot, breathe deeply and get a hand and foot (or lymphatic) massage today. Hit the sauna to sweat out those impurities and drink lots of water to flush your system (alternating between hot and cold pools is an excellent way to do this). Try some hot and spicy foods or garlic to burn out the bad stuff; a shot of gin or a serving of yogurt is also effective against bad bacteria. Consider eating more root crops, organically grown and whole, unprocessed, nutritious foods. Stay active and experience nature. Chances are you won't feel sick tomorrow.