**Boosting your immune system**

There are things we can all do to help ourselves, whatever the current state of our health. There has been much research in the last few decades to help us know what can boost our immune system – so that even if we get viruses and illnesses, we are in a better position to fight them off.

One thing is to drink a lot of water and eat simple foods, with lots of vegetables in our diet, and not too much sugar. This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t enjoy our food – in fact, enjoying our food helps us get much more benefit from it ... so ‘a little of what you fancy’, whether it’s chocolate, sugar or alcohol, is fine for the vast majority of people. But if you are regularly drinking so much that your body has to cope with hangovers, or eating more than your body needs, then it is not able to do its job properly of letting you do what you want to do in your life.

Another thing is exercise – and walking is just about the best exercise for human beings. Most of us could walk more than we do. There is a lot of research to show that being in the fresh air, especially around trees, or the sea, or water such as lakes and streams, really helps boost the immune system.

Yoga helps make people healthier, and the two most important things probably, in this respect, are the focus on breathing, and teaching people how to relax. If you can slow down your breathing a little, breathing fuller and deeper, *but (and this is crucial) without any strain,* then your body benefits and your mind does too – you feel calmer and clearer. You can combine this with some slow simple stretches, to give the lungs and organs more space – particularly important if you spend a lot of time sitting down.

Relaxing consciously is so helpful because it is when we relax that the body can repair itself: when we are fearful, the body-mind goes into the stress response – the opposite of the relaxation response which helps the immune system. Instead, the body and mind think they need to get ready to fight or to run away – so the body diverts resources from the organs which help the immune system, to the arms and legs – great if you are being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger, not so helpful for combating many modern stressors.

So one of the most important things is not to give into fear and panic. When you find yourself feeling anxious or fearful, try thinking instead of something that makes you feel happy and strong and safe: do this often and it gradually will change your thinking – and your health.

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