"Tis the season for snowflakes, fuzzy sweaters and family gatherings, but winter often brings a few uninvited guests as well—sniffles, coughing, soreness, tension and fatigue, to name a few. Whether these visitors announce themselves by you suppressing a sneeze above the massage table or your clients coming in coughing, it’s time to practice extra self-care.

by Brandi Schlossberg

Start by giving yourself a loving pat on the back, for your body is already hard at work fighting the germs that cause illness, such as harmful bacteria and viruses. In fact, while you’re busy baking cookies, wrapping presents or working with clients, your immune system is on around-the-clock watch for invaders that could put a damper on holiday cheer.

One of the best ways to ensure good health, especially in winter months, is to support your immune system on its quest to stave off sickness. With a few simple self-care measures, you can boost this powerful system and reinforce its germ-fighting abilities.

Warriors within

The immune system is quite like an army, composed of various troops, battalions and warriors all working together to defeat a common enemy. The front line of this inner army is known as the complement system. It’s made up of proteins that flow freely in the bloodstream, searching for foreign substances called antigens.

Not only do complement proteins kill intruders, they also signal for reinforcements, in the form of phagocytes, or “eater cells.” These are the troops responsible for finding and devouring bacteria and viruses as well as dead or injured cells.

The duties of the phagocytes don’t stop there. These hardy little warriors then travel to the nearest lymph node, where they present information about the invader they ate to the “generals” of the immune-system army: helper T cells. Once a helper T cell recognizes an antigen, it divides and produces proteins that activate B cells, killer T cells and other
immune-system warriors, also known as white blood cells or lymphocytes. Few invaders survive this full-scale, immune-system onslaught.

“Our immune systems might be the most important weapon we have for living in the modern world,” said Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa, D.N.C., R.H., N.C.T.M.B., senior research scientist at Yogi Tea Company. “Without this protective guardian system, we wouldn’t last a day.”

With an appreciation for the complex, life-saving efficiency of the immune system, it should be clear that supporting this inner army is key to self-care. Of course, healthy diet, sleep and exercise habits will always be central to wellness, but in the winter months you may need extra help to bolster your system.

Fortunately, there are several immune-system boosting elements that can easily be incorporated in everyday life, from receiving massage and sipping herbal teas to inhaling supportive aromas and getting a dose of the right vitamins and minerals.

**Defensive touch**

To support immune function, begin with a bit of your own medicine—massage. Scientific studies show healthy touch is a great defender against stress, which is one of the immune system’s toughest opponents.

“What we’re finding is that when you stimulate pressure receptors on the skin, you cause an increase in vagal activity,” said Tiffany Field, Ph.D., director of the Touch Research Institutes at the University of Miami School of Medicine. “This slows down the physiology, and it slows down the production of stress hormones, particularly cortisol.

“Cortisol destroys natural killer cells,” she continued, “so if you slow down the production of cortisol, you slow the depletion of those cells.”

Field is quick to emphasize that a too-light touch won’t do the trick; moderate pressure is required to stimulate the skin’s receptors. In a number of studies conducted by staff at the Touch Research Institutes, the stimulation inherent to massage therapy was shown to be a major immune booster.

One such study, titled “HIV-positive adolescents show improved immune function following massage,” was published in the *International Journal of Neuroscience*. Researchers found that the subjects’ natural killer cell levels increased after receiving two 20-minute seated massages per week for 12 weeks.

Another study, titled “Leukemia immune changes following massage therapy,” was featured in the *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies*. The subjects were children with acute lymphoblastic leukemia, and the results revealed an increase in white blood cell and neutrophil counts following one month of massage, which was administered by parents for 15 minutes a day.

Such research points to healthy touch as a boon to even the most compromised immune systems. Therefore, it’s not hard to believe that receiving regular massage—especially during the stress-heavy holiday season—is a great way to support your own immune function.

**Herbal action**

In between visits to your favorite fellow bodyworker, try tapping into Mother Nature’s toolbox for immune-boosting benefits. After all, herbs have long served as natural remedies in the war against harmful bacteria and viruses.

“Prevention is key,” Khalsa said. “Remember the old Chinese saying: Treating a disease that is underway is like trying to make weapons while a war is already occurring.”

In other words, in order to ward off the winter bugs that might infect your loved ones and clients, it’s necessary to begin boosting your immune system before sickness strikes. For overall immune-system support,
Khalsa recommends Astragalus root (Astragalus membranaceus).

"This is a renowned immune-system enhancer that's mainly used for long-term disease prevention, but also can be used for the acute symptoms of cold and flu," he said. "Chinese families regularly add Astragalus to the family stewpot during the cold season, so everyone can get a daily immune boost."

Other herbs swing into action as soon as symptoms of illness surface. For instance, an Ayurvedic herb called kalmegh (Andrographis paniculata) often is used to treat upper respiratory infections, including cold and flu. Another herbal remedy, widely used in Native American medicine, is Osha root (Ligusticum porteri).

"This herb is mainly known for its use as a powerful antiviral and antibacterial remedy, employed for bronchial infections and sore throats," Khalsa said. "The root has a numbing effect that soothes sore throats, and it is also an expectorant."

Consult with an Ayurvedic, Chinese medicine or herbal expert for in-depth information on the use of Mother Nature's immune-boosting treasures. For instant immune-system support, try strolling the aisles of a grocery store or health market, where the most popular herbs are often found in the form of tea, produced by companies such as Yogi Tea and Traditional Medicinals.

"Drinking plenty of liquid is one of the best things you can do for a cold," Khalsa said. "So use the chance to take in some herbal tea relief."

Scented support

Similar to the benefits of both herbs and healthy touch, the essential oils employed in aromatherapy may also aid in soothing, protecting and assisting the immune system. Whether blended in massage lotion,
dabbed on skin or diffused in the air, essential oils can help you and your clients stay healthy this winter.

“There are many oils that are excellent antimicrobials, capable of killing or inhibiting bacteria, virus and fungus, thus supporting the immune system in its fight to eliminate unwanted pathogens from the body,” said Tim Blakely, an aromatherapist and educator for Aura Cacia, a company that manufactures pure essential oils. “Many oils are capable of boosting and supporting the body’s antioxidant abilities, too.”

Blakely named lavender for its antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, as well as its ability to calm and relax, which reduces stress. He also listed sandalwood, tea tree, eucalyptus and rose oil as other essential oils often used to support immune-system function.

“It is important that oils be diluted before using,” Blakely said. “Always read and follow any warnings or contraindications on the bottle.”

Be sure to talk to an aromatherapy expert for detailed instructions on the use of essential oils. Then you can add the scented support of aromatherapy to your self-care routine and your massage practice.

Supplementing the system

In the chilly months that surround the holiday season, it may be a good idea to add one more thing to your immune-system-support regimen: an all-in-one supplement that contains the vitamins and minerals you may be missing, even with a healthy diet.

“The body’s immune system can only function properly if it’s receiving the nutrients it needs in their proper form,” said Richard Drucker, Ph.D., founder and CEO of Drucker Labs, makers of organic, carbon-bond nutritional supplements. “Only when complete supplementation occurs, as nature intended, do we receive the benefits of better health and increased immune capability.”

Although the standard, over-the-counter multivitamin may be helpful, for more powerful immune-system support, Drucker recommends organic supplements that contain fruit, vegetable and herbal extracts.

“A true organic nutrient contains carbon,” he said. “When carbon is bound with immune-boosting

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Immune-System Boosters to Implement Now

Cover all your bases when it comes to giving your immune system extra support this winter. By adding these steps to your self-care routine, you may be able to avoid the sickness and stress that have become common side effects of the holiday season. Be sure to consult an expert if you have any questions about proper use or contraindications.

1. Maintain your foundation. Despite the siren song to eat, drink and be merry throughout the winter months, it’s important for overall health and optimal immune function to maintain the basics of well-being: proper diet, exercise and sleep habits.

2. Take your turn on the table. No matter how busy you may be, make time to receive massage. Not only does it feel fantastic, but it also reduces stress, which is good news to the immune system.


4. Smell and be well. Incorporate aromatherapy in your self-care ritual or your massage practice. Essential oils, such as lavender, sandalwood, tea tree and eucalyptus, are popular for their immune-boosting properties.

5. Pick a powerful supplement. Do your homework on nutritional supplements in order to find the most immune-enhancing bang for your buck.

—Brandi Schlossberg
nutrients, such as vitamins A, C and E, antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables and certain herbs, they are able to penetrate the body's cell membranes, where they are needed."

Make an appointment to speak with your health-care provider to find out more about the best supplements for your health during and beyond the holiday season.

Healthy holidays

With winter in full swing, it's wise to take self-care steps that support immune-system function, and advise your clients do the same. After all, several of the measures that boost the immune system also promote relaxation and a sense of well-being—two feelings often missing during the stressful holiday season.

Take the time to receive a massage or brew a hot cup of herbal tea. Enjoy the experience of aromatherapy, and get the body-boosting power of supplements every day. With these simple, immune-friendly additions to self care, you have a better chance of keeping those uninvited winter guests—stress and sickness—at bay.

Brandi Schlossberg is an avid bodywork client and full-time journalist based in Reno, Nevada. She has written recently for MASSAGE Magazine on the topics of "Help Clients Ditch the Dimples: Addressing Cellulite with Aesthetic Massage" (November), "Sweet Slumber: How High-Quality Sleep Enables You to Lead a High-Quality Life" (October), "Positive Posturing: Self-Care through Yoga" (September), "Hydration Matters: Water's Role in Optimal Health" (July), "Massage Linens: Comfort is Queen" (June), "Retreat to Recharge! Wellness Retreats Replenish Energy" (May), "Active Isolated Stretching Comes to the Spa" (April) and "How To Choose The Right Lubricant for Every Massage" (February).
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