

7 Tips to Boost Your Immune System and why it matters for business

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A healthy and fully functioning immune system is vital to running a business. It recognises and combats threats, like bacteria and viruses including the COVID-19 virus and maintains health during times of increased stress.

But what exactly is the immune system and what can you do to keep it healthy? The short answer is “a healthy functioning immune system lives in a healthy body.”

The immune system is a collection of structures and processes within the body. It is essentially our second line defence system, after our skin.

Here are 7 strategies for maintaining a healthy immune system.

- 1. RECOVERY:** Running a small business can require long hours making recovery seem like a luxury you can't afford. However, to optimise immunity and remain able to work optimally, it is critical to focus on recovery, especially to ensure adequate quality sleep.

Sufficient quality sleep increases our levels of lymphocytes, the cells that fight against intracellular pathogens, for example, virus-infected cells such as the flu. Reduced sleep results in increased circulating stress hormones such as cortisol, higher inflammation and contributes to immune imbalance, making you more susceptible to infections.
- 2. FUEL:** When on the run, you may not always be able to eat at regular hours or find healthy food readily available. The effects of eating well most of the time however are significant. To optimise your immunity, it is essential to look after your gut bacteria by consuming a balanced, low processed diet and also consider including prebiotics and probiotics from food. A healthy gut is essential to strong immunity, health and wellbeing. A balanced diet should include portions of plant-based foods, especially leafy greens, and whole grains to ensure intake of adequate prebiotics. Prebiotics are essential for a healthy gut and also include [fermented](#) foods such as yogurt and kombucha. Alcohol intake should be moderate and not exceed national guidelines of 2 units for males and 1 for females daily, as higher levels can depress your immune function as can eating foods high in sugar.
- 3. MOVE:** Making time for physical activity may be challenging when running a small business. Physical activity has been shown to have numerous benefits to the body but from an immune perspective, it increases circulation of the immune cells in the body, making it more likely that they can react quickly where needed in the body.

Physical activity also boosts the production of a type of white cell called macrophages, which help to attack invading bacteria or viruses that can trigger upper respiratory tract infections.

Physical activity temporarily raises body temperature, which has a role in preventing or reducing bacterial growth. However, keep exercise at moderate levels during times of stress as introducing high intensity has a temporary adaptation effect on the immune system.
- 4. THINK:** Stress essentially weakens our immune system. When stressed, the immune system's ability to fight off pathogens is greatly reduced, as the stress hormone cortisol can suppress the effectiveness of the immune system by lowering lymphocytes.

Stress can also have an indirect effect on our immune system as we are more likely to engage in unhealthy behavioural coping strategies, such as increasing alcohol intake, tobacco smoking, eating more processed food and sugar.

At a time when emotions can be high for a small business owner, not getting stressed can be easier said than done. However, stress management techniques that do help combat stressors include staying physically active, spending some time outdoors in nature, maintaining social contact with family and friends, limiting screen time, and introducing mindfulness and/ or meditation to your daily routine (try Insight Timer or Headspace).
- 5. PLAY:** When is the last time you remember truly playing and having fun?

Remember when we used to run around as kids and play? Research has shown that play, especially outdoor play, is associated with a stronger immune system, resistance to allergies and better overall health. Play and regular doses of fun really do keep us healthy.

A good belly laugh also makes us feel better. Research shows that laughter promotes diaphragmatic breathing (diaphragm fluttering up and down at a very quick rate) necessary to create a strong negative pressure and increased flow of lymphatic fluid. This means more immune cells, specifically lymphocytes are produced. So laughter really is good medicine.
- 6. CONNECT:** Many small business owners report feeling isolated, especially during times of increased workload and uncertainty. Isolation is as toxic to our health and wellbeing as smoking a packet of cigarettes daily. The mechanism is not fully understood but is believed to be related to the expression of genes that play a role in causing inflammation and a decrease in expression of genes involved in antiviral responses. Conversely, studies have shown that social contact and laughter have a measurable effect on immune function for several hours. This is a result of decreased stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, which have wide-ranging effects on the nervous and immune systems.
- 7. PERSONAL HYGIENE**

Essential to optimal immunity is personal hygiene, especially hand washing. Keeping hands clean is one of the most important steps we can take to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others. Many diseases and conditions are spread by not washing hands with soap and clean, running water. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend hand washing:

 - Before and after handling or eating food.
 - After sneezing, coughing or blowing your nose.
 - After shaking hands with another person.
 - After using the bathroom.
 - After touching an animal or handling animal waste.
 - After using public transportation.
 - After handling garbage.