

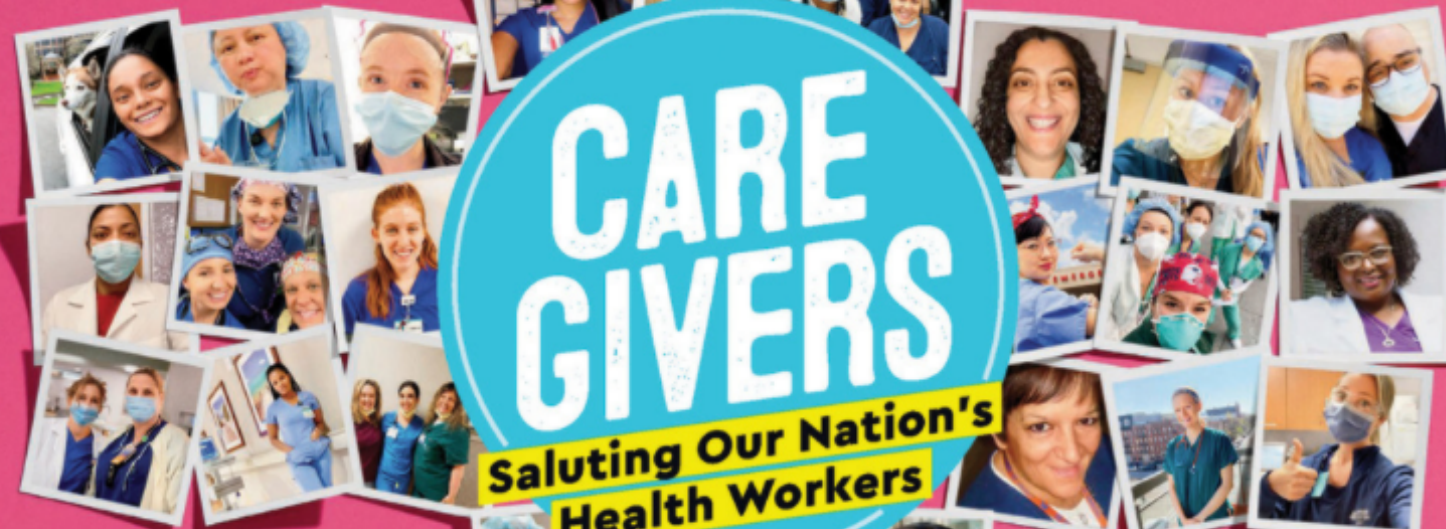
Woman's Day

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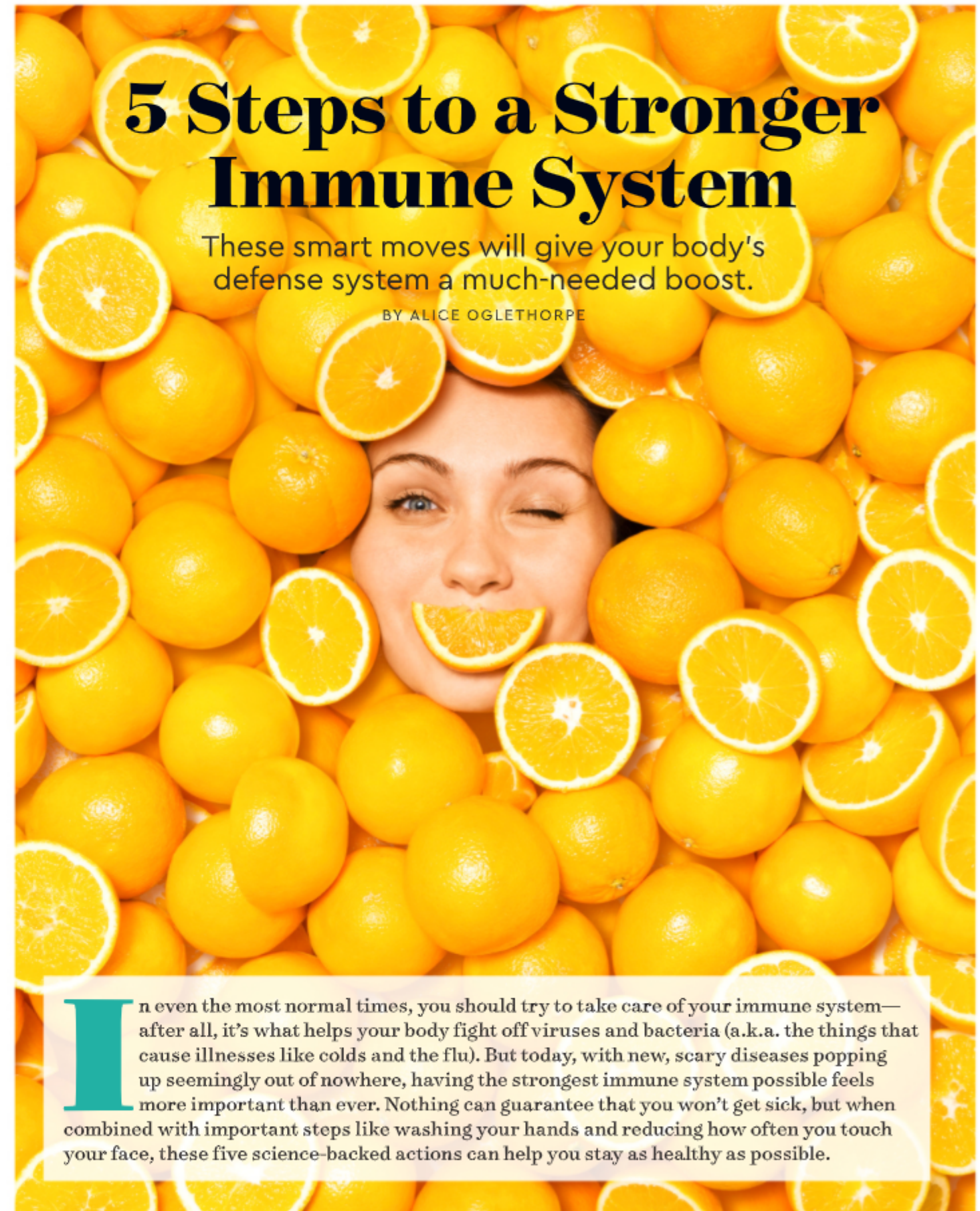
Health

The latest news and wisdom so you can live life to the fullest

5 Steps to a Stronger Immune System

These smart moves will give your body's defense system a much-needed boost.

BY ALICE OGLETHORPE



In even the most normal times, you should try to take care of your immune system—after all, it's what helps your body fight off viruses and bacteria (a.k.a. the things that cause illnesses like colds and the flu). But today, with new, scary diseases popping up seemingly out of nowhere, having the strongest immune system possible feels more important than ever. Nothing can guarantee that you won't get sick, but when combined with important steps like washing your hands and reducing how often you touch your face, these five science-backed actions can help you stay as healthy as possible.

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1. Get a daily dose of vitamin C.

There's a reason you probably picture a big glass of orange juice when thinking about how to fight off a cold: The vitamin C it contains is like catnip for your immune system. Studies show that the powerful antioxidant supports multiple immune functions, like enhancing antibody levels and improving how well microbes are killed. Most women need 75 mg to 90 mg of vitamin C a day, an amount you can easily get through your diet.

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Orange juice isn't the best way to get a daily shot of C, since a cup of it has more than 20 g of sugar. Vitamin C is in lots of other colorful foods, including red peppers, strawberries, and leafy greens. "Scoop hummus or guacamole up with chunks of red bell pepper instead of chips," says Karen Ansel, R.D.N., author of *Healing Superfoods for Anti-Aging*. "And add berries, especially strawberries, to everything from yogurt parfaits to cereal and oatmeal." On top of that, try to use spinach or kale as your salad base. "If you're used to having lettuce, mix it with baby kale or spinach as a way to get accustomed to the taste," says Ansel.

2. Remember to relax.

File this under "Easier said than done," but reducing stress is really good for your immune system. When you feel stressed out more days than not (sound familiar?), bodily functions such as the immune system that aren't immediately essential are lowered, and hormones are released that lessen the body's ability to fight off infection. Chronic stress can also lower the number of white blood cells available to fight off germs, which explains why people with chronic stress are likelier to get sick after being exposed to a cold virus.

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Try mindfulness meditation. Research is starting to show that it can improve the functioning of certain immune processes related to inflammation and fighting disease. Consider guided meditations on apps like Calm and Headspace. Another good idea: Limit your news consumption. Kathryn Boling, M.D., a family medicine doctor with Mercy Medical Center in Lutherville, MD, says, "I tell my patients to allow themselves one half-hour news break a day and otherwise try to tune it out as much as possible."



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3. Move your body.

Ready for yet another reason why regular physical activity is such a good idea? Studies show that it can decrease your risk of getting sick by improving immune regulation. Exercise might also help you feel better faster: Research shows that people who regularly do moderate aerobic activity recover more quickly from a cold than those who don't. There are a few theories as to why, including the idea that exercise helps white blood cells (the little guys that travel around detecting illnesses) circulate more speedily and flushes bacteria out of the lungs.

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On most days of the week, do some kind of moderate activity, like taking a brisk walk, going on a bike ride, or trying a fun streaming workout class (there are loads of free ones on YouTube). Another trick is something called habit stacking. "There are things you do throughout the day, like going to the bathroom or brushing your teeth," says Saara Haapanen, a personal trainer based in Denver. "Each time you do one of those things, also do something active." For example, do 10 squats every time you walk out of the bathroom, triceps dips whenever a new TV episode starts, and a minute of push-ups before each meal or snack. "Every little bit you do throughout the day adds up," says Haapanen.



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4. Cut down on alcohol.

Those two glasses of wine you may enjoy most nights with dinner aren't doing your immune system any favors. Too much alcohol can be disruptive, making it harder for your body to defend itself from bacteria and viruses. It's a bigger problem for chronic heavy drinkers, who may find their immune systems significantly weakened, according to the journal *Alcohol Research*.

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Research shows that moderate drinking likely won't harm the immune system, but many people are surprised at the definition of "moderate": one beer or glass of wine per day for women, according to the CDC. And experts tend to discourage drinking alcohol daily if you want your immune system operating at 100%. There's no need to teetotal completely, but Ansel suggests lightening your normal cocktail—say, by mixing prosecco with some pomegranate or cranberry juice. You can also swap in seltzer for the prosecco. "Make it more exciting with a simple syrup infused with basil or rosemary," Ansel says. Her recipe: Mix equal parts sugar and water in a saucepan with your herbs of choice. Heat until the sugar dissolves, then let cool and remove the herbs.



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5. Get enough sleep.

It turns out that the phrase "sick and tired" is rooted in fact: The less you sleep, the worse your immune system is at fighting off germs. Research shows that people who clock fewer hours of sleep at night (less than seven) are likelier to get sick when exposed to a cold virus. One reason is that when you're asleep, your immune system is hard at work releasing chemicals needed to battle infection. When you stay up too late streaming Netflix, your body may not produce enough of these to do the job (and you'll also experience a dip in infection-fighting antibodies).

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Do you routinely get less than seven hours of zzz's a night? Try setting an alarm on your phone to go off nine hours before you usually wake up. This will help remind you when it's time to start winding down. "You also want to limit how much light you're exposed to at the end of the day," says W. Christopher Winter, M.D., president of Charlottesville Neurology and Sleep Medicine. "Mimic a sunset inside by using dimmer switches and turning on lamps instead of overhead lights. It really helps facilitate sleep." Need motivation to prioritize sleep? Do a mental scan the morning after you've gotten a solid eight hours and see how much better your mind and body feel.

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