

6 Ways to Support Immune Health During Back-to-School Season

Back-to-season brings exciting changes and new adventures for children and families. Unfortunately, it also ushers in cold and flu season. With new schedules, teachers, friends, and activities to look forward to, the last thing anyone wants is to be sidelined with colds, flu, or other illnesses.

Fortunately, there are some simple strategies to help children and everyone in the household stay healthy. These habits can help support immune health and keep the germs away year-round.

Don't skip wellness checkups

An annual wellness checkup is critical for children. During this exam, your doctor can ensure your child is growing and developing normally, and has good health habits. Also important is getting your child's vitamin D status checked as low levels have been shown to negatively impact immune health. If low, consider adding a quality [vitamin D supplement](#). An annual wellness exam is the best way to prevent health problems from developing in the future.

Establish a healthy sleep schedule

Quality sleep helps children do better in school, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it provides health benefits for children and adults, including:

- Lowering stress and improving mood
- Supporting healthy metabolism and weight
- Reducing the risk of chronic diseases, like diabetes and high blood pressure
- Supporting the immune system so it can fight infections and illnesses

Sleep is essential for health and emotional well-being, so help your child prioritize sleep. If the bedtime schedule was more relaxed during the summer, aim to get their sleep schedule back on track one or two weeks before school starts. School-age children need nine to 12 hours of sleep each night, while teens require eight to 10 hours to function well the next day.

Encourage children to go to bed early enough to meet their sleep needs. Help them stick to a consistent sleep-wake schedule, even on weekends. Limit screen time and blue-light

emitting devices in the evening, and establish a relaxing bedtime routine to help them fall asleep faster.

Eat a nutritious diet

A healthy, whole-food diet rich in plants provides essential nutrients that help form immune cells and allow the immune system to work optimally. Key immune-supporting nutrients and good sources of those nutrients include:

- Vitamin C from oranges, grapefruit, strawberries, sweet peppers, kale, and broccoli.
- Vitamin D from fatty fish (salmon), eggs, and fortified milk.
- Vitamin A from leafy green vegetables, carrots, sweet potatoes, and fortified milk.
- Folic acid from beans (legumes), leafy green vegetables, asparagus, and Brussels sprouts.
- Zinc from shellfish, pumpkin seeds, lentils, oats, and breakfast cereals.
- Selenium from Brazil nuts, seafood, and poultry.
- Iron from meat, poultry, fish, chickpeas, lentils, tofu, and spinach.
- Protein from eggs, Greek yogurt, fish, poultry, lean meat, beans, and tofu.
- Probiotics (live beneficial bacteria) from cultured and fermented foods such as yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, and other fermented vegetables.

Deficiency in any single nutrient can negatively impact immune function. If you have picky or selective eaters in the family (even adults) who do not eat a variety of these foods, ask your healthcare provider about taking supplements to close any nutrient gaps. Good ones to consider include:

- [Multi-element buffered vitamin C](#). This form of vitamin C is gentle on your stomach. It includes key minerals and antioxidants to enhance vitamin C's function in the body.[†]
- A [multi-mineral complex](#) with essential major minerals and trace elements.
- [Micellized vitamin A](#) is highly absorbable vitamin A in each drop. Suitable for 9 years and older as recommended by your healthcare provider.
- A [broad-spectrum probiotic](#). A high-quality probiotic can support immune health by keeping harmful bacteria and pathogens in check, strengthening the intestinal lining to form a barrier between toxins and the bloodstream, and promoting a healthy response to inflammation.[†]

**For children it is best to consult with their healthcare provider to determine optimal amounts of these products for them as nutrient requirements can vary based on age, weight and supplement.*

Get plenty of exercise

Regular physical activity, ideally outside in the fresh air and sunshine, helps everyone's body work better. It helps maintain a healthy weight and improves sleep quality. Exercise also supports immune health by improving blood flow, which helps antibodies and infection-fighting white blood cells travel faster throughout the body.

All children should get at least one hour of exercise or physical playtime daily. Adults should get at least 30 minutes of brisk aerobic activity most days of the week, plus two to three days of strength training exercises.

Monitor emotional health

The beginning of a new school year is stressful for children and parents alike. Everyone experiences stress, but it can affect the immune system when it becomes severe or chronic. Under significant stress, children and adults may be less likely to fight off colds, flu, and other infections.

Talk to your children about any school or other worries they may have. Look for changes in their behavior, such as mood swings, becoming withdrawn, stomachs before school, nightmares, or changes in sleeping patterns. They may just need extra attention and reassurance, but ask your healthcare provider for advice or a referral to a behavioral health specialist if stress is ongoing.

Keep your home environment clean and healthy

One of the most effective ways to reduce the spread of germs is by keeping bacteria and viruses away from children and the entire family.

- Encourage everyone to wash their hands when they come home from school or work, after using the bathroom, and before eating.
- Wash bedding and towels at least weekly and more often after someone in the house is sick.
- Regularly clean and sanitize bathrooms, kitchen surfaces, and any high-touch areas, such as the television remote, video game controllers, bathroom faucets, doorknobs, and stair rails.
- Leave shoes and boots by the door to prevent tracking bacteria and viruses into the house.
- Teach children to cover their mouths and noses when coughing or sneezing and to wash their hands often when sick.

These healthy habits are easy to implement. With consistent practice, they can significantly improve your family's health throughout the school year.