

Strengthen your immune system with exercise

Physical activity has many benefits for older adults. One positive effect of exercise is that it strengthens immune function and reduces inflammation that can reduce the severity of illness and infection.¹

Research is emerging on how physical activity improves our immune response to viruses, such as COVID-19.² Chronic illness, like diabetes and heart disease, is a risk factor for getting severely ill with the virus. We know that staying active reduces the risk of many chronic conditions. Also, physical activity increases the number of immune cells and improves how they function.¹ One study has shown that having a higher aerobic fitness decreases the chances of having to go to the hospital with COVID-19.³

As we age, the function of the immune system declines. That can mean a greater chance of severe infection. It can also mean that we do not respond as well to vaccines.⁴ But **the good news is that we can fight that trend with regular moderate exercise.**^{5,6} We know, for instance, that regular physical activity makes flu vaccines work better for older adults⁷.

What type of exercise is best for strengthening the immune system?

Following the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology 24 Hour Movement Guidelines (<https://csepguidelines.ca/guidelines/adults-65/>) for physical activity will provide the right type of exercise for strengthening the immune system.

- ☀️ **Moderate-to-vigorous aerobic exercise:** Aerobic exercise increases your breathing and heart rate. The increased circulation (blood flow) allows immune cells to travel farther into places like the lungs and encounter more infected cells.⁸ Your regular aerobic exercise sessions should add up to 150 minutes a week.
- ☀️ **Muscle strengthening activities:** At least twice a week, do exercises that strengthen the major muscle groups, such as the arms and legs. Strengthening your muscles is just as important because muscles are the source of many proteins that play an important role in immune function.⁵

Being physically active may not prevent us from getting COVID. But a strengthened immune system can help to decrease our symptoms and quicken our recovery times.⁸

References

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