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Building Strong Immune Systems in Our Children

Recent research has found that over-the-counter cough and cold medicines should not be given to children because they are too dangerous. Other studies have shown that children who received antibiotics during their first year of life had a significantly higher risk of asthma by the age of seven. Many parents and physicians are at a loss when these two primary forms of treatment are no longer the best option. What are we to do?

Overall we are seeing an increase in the rates of childhood allergies, asthma and chronic diseases in the developed world. These are all signs of weakened immune systems in our children. Something is wrong here. Our growing children should be getting stronger, not weaker.

Our immune system is the most valuable defense we have. We need a deeper understanding of how the immune system works. We need to support normal immune system growth and development.



What is the Immune System?

The immune system is a complex network of cells, tissues and chemical signals. Its sole function is to protect us. The immune system detects anything foreign, anything that is not “me” and destroys it. It develops and matures over the first seven years of life. When we interfere in that natural maturation process, immune weakness can be the result.

The natural defense system has barriers to protect the body from the outside. These include:

- Skin with its sweat glands, natural oils and good bacteria
- Respiratory tract mucus and cilia trap and carry invaders to the outside
- Digestive tract immune tissues and secretions are a key line of defense
- Good bacteria in the digestive system:
 - Keep harmful micro organisms in check
 - Aid digestion and nutrient absorption
 - Contribute to immune function.

During the first seven years of life these natural defense mechanisms are the body’s main protection system. The immune system matures by being exposed to organisms and mounting an immune reaction which includes fever. Specific antibodies are formed as the body learns what is “me” and what is “not me” and builds a library of antibodies to protect itself. Good bacteria in the digestive tract are important in directing the development of this process.

Fever

Fever is an important part of immune growth. The benefits of fever include:

- More antibodies and interferon are produced
- Increased white blood cell activity
- Higher temperature which directly kills microbes.

In children a fever can be as high as 105 (40.5) degrees before it may cause brain damage. Such extreme rises in temperature are unusual. During a fever do not feed the child unless they are hungry and ensure they drink lots of water.

How we interfere

The following can interrupt immune processes and weaken our defense system:

- Antibiotics kill good bacteria and allow yeast and other pathogens to proliferate
- Fever suppression with medication
- Toxins in our food, water and air affect immune mechanisms
- Poor nutrition deprives the body of the nutrients it needs.
- Excess sugar suppresses white blood cell function
- Trauma and stress interrupt growth and development

Building strong immune systems

General guidelines for strengthening our children's immune systems include the following:

- Making them feel safe and loved
- Good whole foods nutrition including breastfeeding
- Normal exposure to natural environment (i.e. germs)
- Quality infant probiotics (good bacteria) from birth
- Helping them to process emotions, laugh and enjoy life
- Ideally, parents would detoxify before conception

When illness comes

Illness will come, as it is normal, natural and necessary for the immune system to develop properly. When it does, there are supportive things you can do to speed the process and comfort the child:

- Nutritious foods when appetite returns
- Drink mostly water, also herbal teas hot or cold
- Rest and adequate sleep
- Eliminate stress, use humour, funny videos etc.
- Use high quality probiotics, especially if antibiotics are used.
- Time: allow fever to work
- Immune support: herbs, vitamins, glandulars such as thymus gland extract
- Homeopathic support of immune system
- Avoid allergens, irritants, food intolerances
- Hydrotherapy-hot and cold applications to stimulate circulation and reduce congestion