

Prevention to Protection

Stress and the Immune System

As the global community works to fight the spread of the COVID-19 virus, we are getting a lot of information on how to keep ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities safe. Unfortunately, some of this information is frightening, conflicting and even misleading. Here are some important facts that are not being presented by so-called experts on stress and the COVID-19 virus.

Pandemics are nothing new; for example, during the flu pandemic of 1918, fifty million people died. However, our understanding of what caused these deaths has evolved. Those people did not actually die of the flu virus, but the overreaction of their immune systems. And what causes an overreacting immune system? Stress!

Changing Focus

The focus on the coronavirus thus far has been Prevention, that is avoiding contracting the virus and spreading it to others. However, as the situation has become more fluid, we now must transition our focus to Protection. Protection is geared toward making sure our immune system can handle the virus should we contract it.

Prevention is Important

- Wash your hands often and for at least 20 seconds.
- Stay home as much as possible and especially if you are not feeling well.
- Practice respiratory hygiene – this means maintaining a safe space between yourself and others. No handshaking, kissing, or hugging. Sneeze or cough into the crook of your elbow rather than your hand, and if you sneeze into a tissue immediately wash your hands.
- Be diligent about disinfecting. This includes computers and phones.
- Keep supplies stocked and limit going to crowded areas.

Protection is Essential!

It is no secret that stress affects our immune system under normal circumstances, so a crisis situation such as this can certainly pack an extra punch.

There are two hormones that are key to strengthening and protecting your immune system: cortisol and insulin. These hormones regulate the stress response by dictating which nervous system is activated – the sympathetic nervous system (the “Red Zone”) or the parasympathetic nervous system (the “Green Zone”). When we are stressed, the Stress Response activates the Red Zone, which means we are trying to survive a threat (real or perceived) in our immediate environment. It is very important to note that when we are in the Red Zone our bodies go into “fight or flight” mode and all other systems, including the immune system, are shut down.

Simple Basic Measures for Protection

So how do we manage our stress response and stay out of the Red Zone? DIET. If you have your diet dialed in, then you are protecting your immune system and ensuring that if you do contract the coronavirus you can overcome and heal. If you do not have your diet dialed in or you know someone who doesn't, follow these steps.

1. **Hydrate.** Drink water daily. This works to turn on the Green Zone.
2. **Move, move, move.** Get outside if possible or move around the house. The movement changes the physiology by switching off the Red Zone and turning on the Green Zone.
3. **Sleep.** If your body does not get adequate rest, the nervous system will get stuck in the Red Zone. Take naps if you are tired and get quality sleep at night.