There is a lot that we still do not know about the novel coronavirus. However, we do know that people with pre-existing conditions are the most vulnerable to the infection. These pre-existing conditions include heart disease, chronic lung disease, diabetes, and cancer. There is no known intervention that can completely protect us from developing COVID-19. But there are numerous choices that can support the body’s natural defenses. We will tackle the role of stress on our immune health here.
Stress

These times can feel stressful for so many reasons. We may be concerned about our health or the health of loved ones. We may be experiencing financial insecurity. We are all adjusting to a new way to move through the world. Stress is unavoidable, but how we manage stress can significantly impact our immune health. When our immune system is weakened by chronic stress, this can result in our body being more severely affected by infectious diseases and viruses, longer healing times, and reduced effectiveness of vaccines. Fortunately, there are many things we can do to help lower stress. Good sleep, deep breathing, walks in nature, and laughter are ways to increase our body’s relaxation response.

Sleep

Sleep is essential for maintaining the body’s resilience against disease. Lack of sleep is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and obesity. 7-8 hours of restful sleep appears to be the sweet spot for health. Sleeping less than 5 hours per night can increase our risk of catching the common cold by 350% when compared to people who slept at least 7 hours per night. To help ease your body into sleep, it can be very helpful to have a calming bedtime routine. Make sure to dim the lights and avoid screen time (or at least put your phone into ‘night shift’) several hours before bedtime. Try to avoid watching the news or reading anything that has a continuous scroll (such as Facebook and Twitter). These activities can both disrupt proper melatonin secretion and can increase stress. Here are some ideas for relaxing evening activities: read a book, take a bath, play a family card game, go for an evening stroll, do gentle yoga.

Mindfulness / Meditation

Mindfulness practices and meditation have been shown to improve immune status in people who practice regularly. Regular meditation may also decrease the risk of contracting acute respiratory infections. Beginning a meditation practice can seem daunting, but it doesn’t need to be! The goal is not to have a completely clear mind devoid of thought, but rather to practice awareness of the present moment without judgment. It can be done in numerous ways. Apps such as Calm, Insight Timer, and Headspace can help with guided visualizations, calming music, and reminders. Simply sitting quietly and focusing on your breath for 5 minutes is another good option.

Forest bathing

Forest bathing is the practice of spending time in the natural environment. It is a common practice in Japan that involves visiting a forest for relaxation and recreation while breathing in the oxygen-rich air and natural essential oils of the forest. These organic compounds (called phytoncides) are antimicrobial and emitted from the trees. Phytoncides help protect the trees from invading insects and pathogens. Spending time around these fragrant natural oils can lower blood pressure, reduce stress, and increase immune function. Just 2-3 days spent in nature can have a measurable benefit on the immune system for more than 30 days.

Wellness in the Time of COVID-19
Laughter and Positive Affect

Laughter and having a positive mental outlook allows us to gain perspective and distance ourselves from stressful stimuli. It enables us to feel empowered in situations that may otherwise seem to leech power from us (perhaps a feeling many of us can relate to these days). This ability confers considerable health benefits. It can improve our emotional state and prolong our life. A two-year Norwegian study examined the effects of humor on survival in people with renal failure. It found that individuals with a higher than average sense of humor had a 31% increased chance of survival when compared to the control group. Laughing daily may also decrease the risk of cardiovascular disease as found in a recent Japanese study. Another 15-year population study in Norway found that people with high measures of humor were less likely to die due to infection.

If you are looking for some laughs, check out this link for the best of Buster Keaton’s stunts... an oldie but a goodie! 
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_J8XM1_rOTg

References


