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April 2021
£4.95

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A fine balance

Pills, potions, plants and powders – can anything truly supercharge your immune system? Health experts reveal what really works when it comes to staying well, along with the spas that can give you a head start



MOT me! Where to get a health overhaul

By Francesca White, Tatler Spa Guide editor

The needs of the modern spa-goer have evolved. Once, our desires ranged from shaping up (cue military-style boot camps, with meagre portions and shouty instructors) to zoning out (enter the stately spa, with bubbling hot tubs and Bollinger on tap) to healing a broken heart (somewhere far-flung and devoid of wi-fi). Today, however, our priorities have shifted: we want something that will boost our strength, restore our health and leave us feeling bulletproof. Fortunately, there's a raft of new retreats promising exactly that.

Leading the charge is RAKxa, where medical consultations and holistic wellness sit side-by-side. Located in Bangkok's 'Green Lung' (a jungle-clad island on the Chao Phraya River), it's a dreamy destination to strengthen mind and body – and its Immunity Booster programme is already in high demand. Treatments range from traditional (Thai massage) to cutting-edge (laser IV infusions and cryotherapy); toxins are cleared via colonics, and sweated out in the infrared sauna; and the food, though delicately portioned, replenishes and heals.

Closer to home, in Greece's Peloponnese region, the sublime Euphoria attracts those in need of a reboot – and it has a new five-day Immunity Reset programme, designed to encourage positive healing and change. While the mood-boosting Mediterranean diet, outdoor movement sessions and curative pools lift the spirit, the targeted workouts and detoxifying treatments inspire resilience.

In Alicante, Spain, the spaceship-slick SHA Wellness Clinic has long been a refuge for those recuperating from illness, and its new immunology 'booster' is a fortifying supplement to its signature Rebalance programme. Check into a private residence, with personal chef and panoramic pool, for a seven-day overhaul, including a series of assessments (lymphatic system and viral profiles, energy check), treatments (such as regenerating ozone therapy and infrared heat) and optional add-ons (stem-cell therapy, vitamin C 'megadoses' and stress management). With programmes co-developed by Nasa and Harvard Medical School, it guarantees a reboot.

Meanwhile, in London, Lanserhof at The Arts Club is launching LIFE: a supervised fasting programme designed to reset the body. Guests arrive at the gleaming Dover Street clinic and undergo an MRI scan, blood tests and gut analysis. What follows is a carefully orchestrated symphony involving supplements, lymphatic drainage and a bespoke fasting plan, based on the FX Mayr principles (lots of chewing, alkaline foods and a ban on sugar). The Mayr Method is said to act 'like a fountain of youth' and has been proven to reduce inflammation.

Those looking for a way to feel supercharged at home might want to consider qigong, an ancient Chinese exercise and healing technique. It can 'support your immunity, give you energy, lower your heart rate and blood pressure, and relieve pain', says Katie Brindle, a Chinese-medicine practitioner and the founder of the Hayo'u method, who leads classes via her website. But for a swift immunity-supporting exercise, Brindle recommends 'tapping': 'With a loose fist or bamboo tapper, simply "tap" all over your body, especially along your inside leg. This stimulates two key organ channels that are vital to immunity – the spleen and the kidney,' she explains. You can do it whatever your fitness level, anytime, anywhere – proof that healing often starts at home.

RAKxa Three-night Immunity Booster programme, from £4,899pp, with healingholidays.com

Euphoria Five-day Immunity Reset programme, from £5,399pp, with healingholidays.com

SHA Wellness Clinic Seven-night Rebalance & Immune System programme, from £5,099pp, with healingholidays.com

Lanserhof at The Arts Club Seven-day LIFE programme, from £4,500pp; lanserhof.com

Healing Holidays packages include BA flights, transfers, full-board accommodation and £50 towards the cost of a Covid-19 PCR test

The truth about supplements

By Dr Paul Clayton, clinical pharmacologist

What can I take to support my immune system?

The beta-glucans are the only ingredients that have been shown to amplify the effects of innate immune cells, and these are crucial in defending against viral and bacterial infection. I like Wellmune – it has so much research behind it. Elderberry has some antiviral effects if used properly. The best evidence suggests that if you are dealing with a virus that starts in the oropharynx (the middle part of the throat), and use elderberry lozenges, the high concentrations of actives in the immediate area can bind viruses and help stop them from entering new cells and multiplying.

What do you recommend for general health?

I favour an omega 3/olive-oil blend, a time-release blend of prebiotics, and a well-designed micro- and phytonutrient programme that combines vitamins and minerals with key plant extracts; for these, try Zinzino. Life Extension (a US brand) is good for specialised formulations, while Swanson is reliable and cost-effective. For a more luxury offering, try Lyma, a brand I work with – it adds a different set of functionalities including enhanced mood, better immunity and improved skin and hair.

What is the biggest misconception about supplements?

The idea that you can get everything in a once-a-day format. The so-called A-Z tablets are a waste of money, and fish-oil capsules have been proven not to work. What's more, these are the two biggest categories in the supplement market.

Do I need them if I don't have a deficiency?

Being very low in a particular nutrient is 'deficiency', being just lower than optimal is 'depleted'. There is plenty of evidence that depletion can also impact health, including immune health – and depletion is now the norm, thanks to ultra-processed foods.

What is the link between the gut and the immune system?

A large part of the immune system is located in and around the gut and is called GALT (gut-associated lymphoid tissue). There is a lot of communication between the microbiome and the gut, and the gut and the immune system, so an unhealthy gut can result in an impaired immune system. To achieve microbiomal shift (improvement in the gut), you need a time-release blend of prebiotics: my favourite is ZinoBiotic.