



## Top 7 Strategies for Managing Stress Around Infectious Disease

Staying informed about the spread of COVID-19 and the measures that you can take to protect your health and the health of your loved ones is critical. However, spending too much time researching coronavirus can negatively impact your sense of wellbeing and compromise your physical health. Reports often contain words like *outbreak*, *pandemic*, and *quarantine* that can stir up a lot of anxiety—and even panic. Growing uncertainty about the virus’s impact in the US has many people feeling worried or stressed. While the concern is warranted, it detracts from what is most important: staying healthy.

Did you know that chronic stress and anxiety can actually make you more likely to catch a cold or become ill? It’s no surprise that stress has negative impacts on a person’s health; after all, no one likes to be stressed! But reducing stress isn’t just good for your mental health, it also improves your body’s immune response.

### Why Stress Matters for Immune Function

In modern life, stress can feel constant. The human body perceives and responds to stress both psychologically and physiologically. Stressful events can cause emotional feelings of unhappiness or being overwhelmed. Often, stress is accompanied by very real physical reactions: rapid heartbeat, sweating, muscle pain, and digestive difficulties. Psychological stress can also dramatically increase inflammation in the body. This is because your body—and more specifically your brain—is triggered to produce stress hormones that send signals throughout the nervous system. When the body is responding to stress, it reallocates energy to fight an imminent danger. While this can have short-term benefits, chronic stress reduces immune function.

Stress, immunity, and disease progression have reciprocal relationships. A powerful way for you to reduce your risk and stay healthy is to practice stress management techniques, which researchers suggest have potentially powerful effects on your immune system.

### Seven Strategies to Reduce Stress

**Avoid Information Overload:** While it can be tempting to hunt for all of the available information, emerging research may contain errors or inaccuracies that will be addressed over time. Even experts recognize that they don’t know enough about emerging infectious diseases. By taking a deep breath and acknowledging that *no one* has all the answers, you can avoid unwanted stress and anxiety.

- Tip—set appropriate boundaries for researching the coronavirus by limiting yourself to 30 minutes or less per day

**Practice Gratitude:** In times of uncertainty and worry, negative thoughts can dominate. Practicing gratitude can help your mind remember the positive elements of your life and, if your gratitude is shared, may have a ripple effect of increased positivity.

- Tip—write an email, text, or letter to someone who has had a positive impact on your life
- Tip—keep a running list of things you are grateful for on a daily basis

**Try Meditating:** For some people, daily mindfulness meditation has an enormous positive impact not only on mental health but also on physical health and the immune system.

- Tip—there are many free videos and apps for mindfulness meditation; experiment to find what works for you. Dr Fenske’s favorite app is from the Center for Healthy Minds at UW. It is called Healthy Minds Program.

**Create a Homecoming Routine:** Make it a habit to wash your hands as soon as you return home. That’s the first step. Afterward, create a comfortable environment in your home that washes away the stress of your day.

- Tip—light a candle (or use an essential oil diffuser) for calming aromatherapy
- Tip—make your home lively with music you enjoy, and decorate with items that bring you happiness

**Celebrate Good Habits:** Infectious diseases like the flu and COVID-19 are going to persist, so when you are able to make positive change in your daily habits, take a moment to recognize yourself. Whether that’s eating a new vegetable every day, adding vitamin D to your routine, or adopting elbow-to-elbow greetings, take a moment be positive.

**Exercise:** In addition to distracting you from anxiety, exercise also changes your brain function and can decrease stress. Exercise can increase expression of feel-good neurotransmitters like serotonin and boost immune function.

- Tip—whether you love to dance, hit a punching bag, walk, swim, juggle, or do yoga, find something you personally enjoy
- Tip—make it bite-sized, doing small increments of movement throughout the day tied to your routines, such as dancing while boiling water or doing lunges while brushing your teeth

**Connect:** Contact someone you love. We need each other. Don’t hesitate to reach out.