



Gift to Self

The most wonderful time of the year can also be the most frazzling—even in non-pandemic times. To help you enjoy this month to the fullest, we asked experts for scientifically proven ways to stay healthy (eat your prebiotics) and happy (let go of perfection!). Implement these eight ideas now, and thank yourself later.

TEXT BY NAOMI BARR

1. Play Strong Defense

For better immunity, start with the heaviest hitters: a flu shot and, if you're eligible, a Covid booster to keep viruses at bay. These reach max efficacy in two weeks, so the ideal time for the flu shot is early fall—but now is not too late. Then talk to your doctor about taking supplements like vitamin C, which can help vanquish certain bacteria and shorten the duration of common colds; and vitamin D, which may play a role in fighting off Covid-19 and its variants, per early research from *Endocrine Practice*. Also, raise your heart rate. According to a review published earlier this year in *Sports Medicine*, regular exercise can increase our antibody counts so significantly that it can lower our risk of developing a viral or bacterial infection by a stunning 31 percent. (For winter-friendly ways to fit in some activity, turn the page.) Prioritize shut-eye, since any less than seven to nine hours a night can lead to higher stress-hormone levels in your body, which can impair your immune-system response. And don't forget to make time to see close friends and loved ones, even if it's virtual or outdoors under a heat lamp. Maintaining social ties not only reduces stress; it lowers your risk of colds.

2. Trust Your Gut

When your digestive system is functioning well, it teems with beneficial microbes, aka probiotics, that support immunity. Unfortunately, many of December's delicious offerings have the opposite effect: "Foods high in sugar and fat are exactly what our gut microbiome doesn't like," says Gail Cresci, PhD, RD, a microbiome researcher in the department of pediatric gastroenterology, hepatology, and nutrition at Cleveland Clinic Children's Hospital. "When we eat more of those, that shift in diet can throw good and bad bacteria out of

balance within a day or two.” Fortunately, they bounce back just as quickly. Between yuletide treats, restore your gut with probiotic-rich fermented foods like yogurt and kimchi, and eat plenty of whole grains and colorful fruits and vegetables; these foods contain *pre*biotics, which feed probiotics so they thrive. Poor sleep, stress, travel, and sitting around more than usual can derail digestion, too. Supplemental probiotics also help reset your microflora. Look for at least one billion units of bacteria, keep them in the fridge (even shelf-stable ones stay alive longer in cool temps), and take them at about the same time each day.

3. Practice Mind Over Platter

Speaking of those holiday indulgences: If you want to skip overdoing it in the first place, take a page from the Institute for Integrative Nutrition, in New York City. Its health-coaching program posits that when you feel full in ways that really matter—having strong relationships, a healthy body, an active mind, and pursuits that you’re passionate about—food becomes secondary. So when you walk into a gathering, focus on fostering connections rather than just beelining to the buffet. “Make a point to have fun with friends or family,” says Jennifer Wegmann, PhD, a lecturer in the department of health-and-wellness studies at Binghamton University, in New York. “Ask questions about their lives, and really listen to the answers.” Drop into this time with others, and when you do sink your teeth into a piece of pie, chew slowly so you can focus on the incredible flavors.

4. Get a Move On

Cold weather, shorter days, and overstuffed schedules make working out tougher, but staying active is essential to firing up your metabolism, energy levels, and mood. Think of physical activity not as a to-do, but as a generous present to yourself. Plan a walk with friends rather than a coffee date (or do both—ask them to walk with you to a bar or café). Get your steps in—and support local stores—by shopping for gifts in town. Choose physical family activities: Feel the wind in your hair at a favorite skating rink, rally a pickleball tournament on an indoor court, or turn up some jazzy holiday tunes and get everyone swinging.

5. Count Your Lucky Stars

Reams of research support it: People who regularly express gratitude live significantly healthier, more joy-filled lives. You can list your blessings in a journal or while meditating, but “it can also be texting a loved one something you appreciate about them,” says Paula Gill Lopez, PhD, an associate professor of psychological and educational consultation at Fairfield University, in Connecticut. Or give thanks by giving back: Donate to a charity that has personal meaning for you, like the animal shelter where you adopted your pup; or walk a box of your prized Christmas cookies over to the neighbor who shoveled snow off your driveway.

6. Take a Time-Out

Family is family, for better or for worse! When the going gets tense, try this move, which Peloton yoga instructor Chelsea Jackson Roberts employs to deflate stress, stat: Lie on the floor with a rolled blanket under your knees; place one hand on your heart center (where your rib cage meets) and the other on your stomach. Take three slow, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth; then breathe naturally for a few minutes, feeling the rise and fall of your chest and belly. Repeat as needed.

7. Holiday Your Way

We’ve all discovered that some of the “temporary” changes of the past two years—working remotely, spending more time with family, sporting slippers all day—may be things we want to do permanently. For some people, another new-found pleasure is scaled-down holidays. Should the idea of a large party make you squirm, politely decline, but suggest dinner or drinks with the host at a later date. If joining family during the biggest travel days of the year sounds harrowing, keep it small now, and plan a reunion at a less busy time, making your decision known in time for others to plan without you. “The better you become at setting boundaries, the less guilt you’ll feel, because you’re pursuing the things you really want for yourself,” says Nedra Glover Tawwab, a Charlotte, North Carolina-based therapist and author of *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* (TarcherPerigee).

8. Stop and Smell the Amaryllis

Studies suggest that acts of self-care can have more lasting, brain-transforming effects if you bring your full attention to them. “When you do something nice for someone else or yourself, like support a small business, that warm feeling triggers the release of feel-good neurotransmitters, such as oxytocin and endorphins, in your brain. But after a little while they will subside,” says Gill Lopez. However, taking time to have an engaging chat with the shop owner, for example, will dig deeper grooves for those smile-inducing chemicals to flow more easily and make feeling happy become more habitual. “Even small actions like sipping your morning coffee can have this effect if you take time to savor it,” says Tayyab Rashid, PhD, a clinical positive psychologist at the University of Toronto Scarborough. “This also stops you from anticipating the end of a wonderful experience.” In other words, being present is an amazing present in itself.