THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

What Weakens Your Immunity?

READING 1 · WHAT WEAKENS YOUR IMMUNITY?

Task 1 · Matching paragraphs | Scan first. Find which paragraph (A–F) does each of the following. Some paragraphs are used more than once. Write the letter in the yellow box.

#	WHICH PARAGRAPH…	A–F
1	mentions that one sex is at considerably greater risk	
2	argues that being too clean can do more harm than good	
3	links weak immunity to a lack of rest	
4	describes the condition in which the immune system attacks the body itself	
5	advises the reader not to waste an opportunity to go to bed early	
6	suggests that low immunity may result in frequent colds and even allergies	
7	states that normal life would be impossible without certain organisms	
8	describes an unpleasant symptom as a good sign	
9	says occasional negative emotions are harmless, but constant pressure is not	
10	claims that some organisms can do both harm and good	
11	explains that the body cannot fight two demands at once, so the system fails	

Now read the paragraphs.

A The so-called hygiene hypothesis proposes that an environment which is too clean can leave a person more likely to fall ill, not less. The argument runs as follows: an immune system that meets very little dirt and very few microbes in early childhood never learns where the real threats lie, and later overreacts to harmless substances instead. Supporters of the hypothesis point to the rise in allergic conditions in wealthy countries over the last fifty years. Critics reply that "dirt" is not a single variable and that correlation is not causation — a reminder that a plausible mechanism is not the same thing as proof.

B Your immune system depends on sleep as much as any other system in the body. During long periods of insomnia, or after too many late nights, the body is placed under additional physiological stress, and people who sleep too little are measurably more likely to become ill than people who sleep enough. It is worth changing how you think about an early night: it is not an evening lost, but one of the cheapest interventions available to keep yourself healthy.

C When most people hear the word "bacteria" they think of illness. Yet a large proportion of the bacteria we encounter every day are not merely harmless but essential. The human gut contains an enormous population of microorganisms that help to digest food, produce certain vitamins and compete with genuinely dangerous species for space and nutrients. Some of the same species, however, can cause serious disease if they reach a part of the body where they do not belong — which is why the categories "good" and "bad" are far less useful in microbiology than in everyday speech.

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D Sometimes the system simply stops working correctly and begins to attack healthy tissue. This condition, known as autoimmune disease, is considerably more common in women, who make up roughly eighty per cent of patients. Because immune failure can turn a minor illness into a severe one, early recognition of the symptoms matters a great deal, and a small amount of prevention can be genuinely life-saving.

E When you are ill you probably wish you could avoid every symptom that comes with the illness. Look more closely, though, and you will notice that a cough, a fever or a headache are signs that the body is doing exactly what it is designed to do. A symptom means the immune system has detected a foreign agent and has begun to fight back. Even the general feeling of being unwell has a function: it is a warning to conserve energy so that the body can concentrate its resources on the infection.

F Everyone knows that stress should be avoided where possible. What is less widely known is that stress can measurably weaken immune defence. Under pressure the body releases a set of chemical messengers designed to help it survive an emergency; when those messengers remain elevated for weeks or months, immune function declines. This is why people so often report falling ill during the hardest periods of their lives — the body is not equipped to fight an infection and a prolonged emergency at the same time.

Task 2 · Multiple choice (Paragraph A) | The hygiene hypothesis. Choose the correct answer. Circle A, B or C.

1. According to the hygiene hypothesis, an environment that is too clean can
   - A protect a person from all diseases
   - B leave a person more likely to fall ill
   - C make the immune system stronger forever

   Answer: _____
2. An immune system which meets very few microbes in early childhood
   - A learns to ignore all foreign substances
   - B never learns where the real threats lie
   - C becomes completely inactive

   Answer: _____
3. Supporters of the hypothesis point to the rise in allergic conditions in
   - A wealthy countries over the last fifty years
   - B poor countries over the last ten years
   - C all countries equally

   Answer: _____
4. Critics of the hygiene hypothesis say that
   - A dirt is the only cause of allergies
   - B the hypothesis has been fully proved
   - C correlation is not the same as causation

   Answer: _____
5. The main idea of the hygiene hypothesis is that excessive cleanliness may
   - A train the immune system perfectly
   - B cause the immune system to overreact later
   - C eliminate all bacteria from the body

   Answer: _____

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