



Our body: Our last line of defense against COVID-19

Disclaimer: These recommendations are directed towards healthy adults. The needs of the elderly, children, pregnant women, and the sick may be different. By following the recommendations shown below, we can help these vulnerable groups by not getting sick.

For close to two months now, we have been at war with an unseen enemy, the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. As this enemy rapidly spreads and evolves, our understanding of the COVID-19 disease also improves. It is now clear that the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, which is the etiologic agent for the COVID-19 disease, is behaving differently compared to the first SARS-CoV in 2003. Although the disease appears to have a lower case fatality rate, it spreads faster with a greater proportion of mildly asymptomatic cases, which to health planners is a bigger problem because the infectious patients are healthier and more mobile, thus spreading the disease more rapidly. These cases are often undetected and undiagnosed because testing has prioritized the more symptomatic and severe cases. In the absence of a cure, all of the current government and community efforts are focused on detecting the cases, isolating them to cut transmission and preventing exposure of the susceptible population by restricting mobility and proximity with possible infectious cases.

What can we, as individuals, do?

We can strengthen our body's natural defenses and ability to recover if infected. Fortunately, science has given us enough reliable knowledge to do this. In one word, the strategy is **LIFESTYLE**.

LIFESTYLE has many dimensions. It means avoiding tobacco, alcohol and drugs. It means having enough fresh air and clean water, wholesome food, sunshine, exercise, sleep, and a healthy, active mind. Practically all of these are free (most of the time, anyway), except for food. So, let us work on our food.

Our first COVID-19 communication ("The Looming Food Crisis") called for community and household food production. Thankfully, this is now being implemented on a wide scale by the government, private individuals and corporations. You must participate one way or another. For those who have no choice but to buy food, make every peso spent count.

Avoid highly processed food such as sugar, white rice, white bread, soft drinks, and instant noodles. Keep away from foods that are high in sugar, salt, unhealthy fats, artificial flavors, and preservatives (popularly known as junk food). These have been linked to obesity and chronic diseases, making us more susceptible to COVID-19. Go for the healthy way of eating. When you can, eat only whole food.





What else does science prescribe? In January 2019, an interdisciplinary group of international experts came up with a food guide called the Planetary Health Diet. Translated into the Philippine setting, it means drastically increasing our consumption of grain legumes (mungbean, cowpea, peanuts), vegetables (malunggay, alugbati, saluyot, kangkong, talinum, among other local vegetables), starchy root and tuber crops (camote, cassava, gabi, and yam), banana and fish. It means switching to healthy rice alternatives: brown rice, or rice-corn blend. The local food recommendation called Pinggang Pinoy is a suitable interpretation of the Planetary Health Diet.

Science also tells us that the manner by which food is processed matters. Germinated seed such as mungbean sprouts and germinated brown rice are more nutritious; germination produces bioactive compounds that improve brain function among other benefits. Fermented plant products such burong mustaza, santol, mango, and fermented rice (puto); and animal products such fermented fish, shrimps, yoghurt, and cheese are recommended not only to nourish us, but also our gut microbiome, the friendly microbes inhabiting our gut. Our microbiome enhances our nutrition and immunity from disease.

Our selection of food components is also important. Whole fruit with its fiber is better than juice. Meat on the bone and organ meat (liver, kidney, lungs, heart, gizzard) are better than lean. They give more health benefits if consumed in moderation. Coconut oil is known to have antiviral properties. Eat more ginataan.

We are blessed with so much functional foods that are used by many cultures for millennia as herbal medicine. Among these are ginger, turmeric, lemon grass, garlic, and mushrooms. Local foods that are believed to have a great impact on our body defense and repair systems include eggplant, mango, and bamboo shoots. Take them.

Lastly, science recently affirmed the wisdom of eating less often¹. Fasting² promotes autophagy, a process that destroys viruses and bacteria and gets rid of damaged cell structure. It also boosts our immune system and slows down aging, among other benefits. Start by eating only twice a day within a six-to-eight-hour window (intermittent fasting). If you are adventurous, try one day a week fasting, an age-old practice of billions of people in many cultures. As there are many versions of fasting, it is best to do fasting with medical supervision.

We can beat COVID-19 by strengthening our body defenses and repair systems. The components of the recommended LIFESTYLE strategy are mostly free. Use all of them to maximize the benefits.

¹ Rafael de Cabo, Mark P. Mattson (2019). "Effects of Intermittent Fasting on Health, Aging, and Disease." *New England Journal of Medicine*, 381 (26): 2541 DOI: 10.1056/NEJMr1905136

² Strictly "fasting" is only about restricting the time window for eating. It is often misunderstood as restricting the amount of food intake or prescribing what food to eat. Because of this, it is sometimes classified derisively as a fad diet, along with such names as Atkins, Keto, etc. For the same reasons, it is sometimes criticized as anti-poor. The truth is billions of people from different socio-economic classes and different cultures have been practicing fasting for millennia. A practice that has existed for this long could not be a fad.