A Strong Immune System Starts in the Gut
By Dr. Ramona Warren

It’s the time of year when we see an increase in colds and flu. This year, it seems the flu season has hit much earlier and harder than usual. We tend to stay inside more during the winter months, and germs spread quickly, especially when we are around those who are coughing and sneezing. Many times when children are in the house it can be difficult to clear our homes of the "bugs" that are so prevalent. But did you know there are healthy “bugs” that improve our immunity and therefore improve our health?

Our bodies are filled with bugs. There are about 100 trillion bugs, better known as bacteria, that live in our digestive tract. We have 10 times more bacteria in our bodies than cells -- 100 trillion bacteria to 10 trillion human cells. This bacteria helps comprise our intestinal flora, and plays a critical role in helping keep our immune system strong.

Both “good” and “bad” bacteria live in the intestinal tract. To stay healthy, our bodies need to have more “good” bacteria than “bad” bacteria. How can we determine if we have the right ratio? Our bodies let us know by the symptoms we experience. When our gut flora becomes imbalanced the result can be constipation, diarrhea, heartburn, bloating and irritable bowel syndrome. Other symptoms include chronic fatigue, premature aging, joint and muscle pain, weight gain, insomnia, eczema, acne, asthma and even autism and cancer.

An increase in bad flora can occur when we are stressed, eating packaged and processed foods, eating fast foods, consuming sugar, overdrinking and overindulging. “Bad” bacteria feed on sugars and fats found in these foods. Another cause of imbalanced gut flora is eating mostly cooked foods. This destroys essential nutrients and enzymes important for good digestive health. Antibiotics can also disrupt the overall gut flora balance.

In order to improve our digestive health, and our overall immunity, we should start with eating “real” food. Vegetables and high-fiber foods such as green leafy vegetables, garlic, onions and artichokes actually feed the “good” bacteria. We should also eat at least 50% of our food in a raw state. Eating a daily salad with lots of colorful vegetables is a simple way to accomplish this. Eating fermented foods such as sauerkraut, kimchee, yogurt, miso, tempeh, olives, pickles and kefir can also help improve gut health. (Although it is best to make sure the yogurt and kefir and unflavored, since “bad” bacteria breed on the sugars.)

Another way to improve your digestive system is to improve your stomach acid. When we have proper acidity in the stomach, germs and foreign invaders such as parasites and bad bacteria are destroyed before they can get to the gut. Many people assume they have too much stomach acid due to chronic heartburn or acid reflux. Often, however, these symptoms are caused by low stomach acid. To increase your stomach acid, you can supplement with betaine hydrochloride. (The book *Why Stomach Acid is Good for You* by Dr. Jonathan Wright, M.D. is an excellent resource on this issue.)

A good quality probiotic supplement can also help restore gut flora balance. And finally, do your best to avoid taking antibiotics, which destroy the beneficial bacteria, and disrupts the overall balance of good and bad bacteria.

When you focus on improving your digestive health, your immune system will reap the benefits. You will discover you require fewer medications and, more importantly, find yourself further down the path toward optimal health.