

# Integrative Medicine Perspective by Dr. Julie

by Julie T. Chen, MD  
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## 'My Medications Put Me at Risk for Infections ... What Can I Do?'

Many patients with autoimmune diseases frequently ask me about ways to help them prevent infections. Because they are usually on at least one form of immunosuppressant medication, they tend toward more infections and colds. And when they get these infections, the severity and duration is usually greater and longer.

The difficulty with treating these patients is finding a regimen that supports normal immune function enough so that they can avoid infections, but not does dramatically increase immune functioning such that their autoimmune symptoms are triggered.

The key is to utilize herbs and vitamins that naturally decrease inflammation while gently supporting immune functioning. There are some typical "cold supplements" such as echinacea that I find can trigger some of my autoimmune patients, especially if they have seasonal allergies; for example, since echinacea is in the ragweed family, they might have an allergic inflammatory reaction to it.

Let's utilize one of my patient cases to examine various ways of gently supporting the immune system without triggering such an exaggerated response that an autoimmune patient might end up hurting from the regimen rather than benefiting from it.

J. T.\* is a 57 year-old woman who has rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and takes Humira and Plaquenil regularly to control her symptoms. She usually got a cold almost every other month, since her granddaughter, whom she likes to visit, seems to catch colds frequently.

J.T. despises getting colds especially since it requires that she stop her Humira injections until her cold symptoms improve back to almost baseline. She usually will have a RA flare while off Humira and her immune system responds to help fight her cold. So her goal is finding a cold regimen such that she can get over her symptoms quickly and thus

be able to get back on Humira and not flare too much from her RA.

She had been seeing me for about a year when she asked me about cold supplements. She was already on a regimen of an anti-inflammatory, mostly plant-based diet and also several supplements for her RA.

She usually reschedules her appointments when she has a cold, but during one of her colds, she finally decided to come into the clinic to ask me about immune supportive supplements.

When patients ask me about immune support or disease treatment, I always start with guidance in their nutritional habits and on how to support the immune system enough so that it can naturally prevent emergence of a full-blown cold.

She loves garlic, so I asked her to start eating a clove of garlic every day or at least every other day for healthy immune functioning and it also would be beneficial for anti-inflammation for her RA. Garlic is a great food to eat daily if possible for many health reasons, including immune support and anti-inflammation.

Since I already had her on vitamin D3, I just reinforced the need for her to have optimal vitamin D level of about 60 to 80 in her labs (as long as her parathyroid hormone is normal, which it had been). Vitamin D is an important part of a healthy immune system, so maintaining an adequate level is important not just for her RA status but also for her immune-suppressed status.

Lastly, for general immune support, I asked her to increase her vigilance in water, green tea, and vegetable intake during cold season to ensure adequate fluids, vitamins, antioxidants, and phytonutrients. I also asked her to make sure that she takes the probiotic that I gave her for her RA on a daily basis to ensure optimal immune functioning.

When it comes to supplements for when she has a cold, we started with the multivitamin concept. Since she eats a broad variety of rainbow-colored vegetables, she usually only takes a multivitamin about twice per week as a gap-filler. However, I asked her to take a multivitamin daily during the time when she is fighting or has a cold because she will need higher dosages than usual of certain vitamins and minerals, and the easiest way to get this is through her multivitamin. When she doesn't have a cold, I agreed that she does not need a multivitamin daily (because she has a well-balanced plant-based diet and her labs did not suggest that she needed a multivitamin on a daily basis).

During her colds, I also recommended that she take an extra 1 gram of fish oil, vitamin C at 2 to 3 grams per day (has antihistamine effects at higher dosages), increased probiotic dosage, free-form amino acid powder, black elderberry (seen to have antiviral and antibacterial activity in some studies), and an extra tablet of ginger and curcumin with bioperine. These supplements tend to be relatively safe for most patients and help to provide support for optimal immune function to fight and suppress infections.

There are of course other options for immune support and cold symptom treatment such as quercetin, honey, and echinacea, to name a few; however, some of these options may be problematic for certain patient populations (including, as I mentioned, echinacea for those with ragweed allergies; and honey may be too high in glycemic level for diabetics at therapeutic dosages).

After J.T. started implementing these daily changes and using the suggested supplements at the first sign of colds or infections, she has had fewer colds, and when she gets them, they are less severe and "they peter out really quickly."

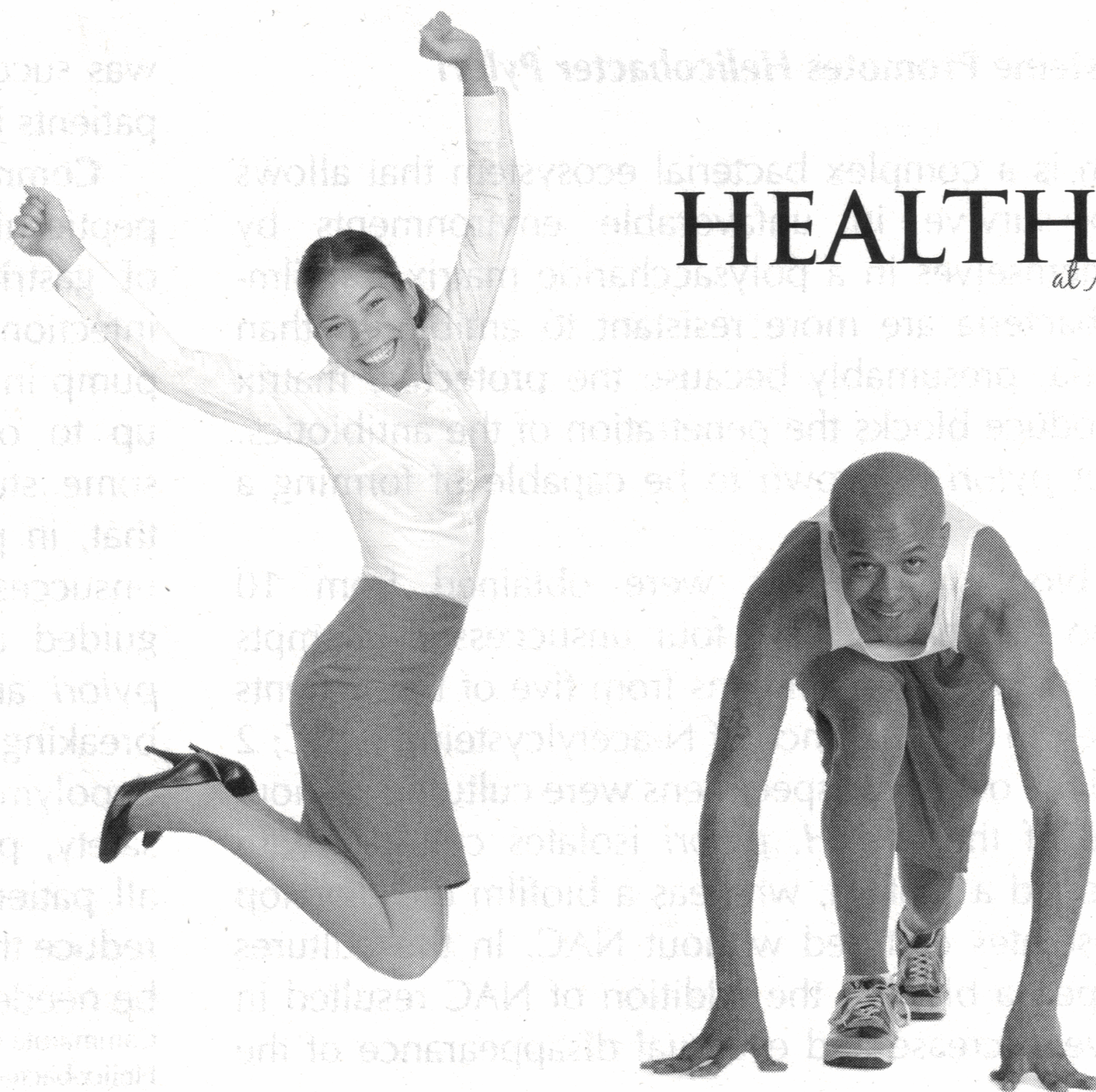
J.T. is a good example of how when we give the body the tools it needs to do what it was made to do – to heal and fight off infections – it can do the job more optimally. By using mild supplements that aim more at anti-inflammation and using food as medicine, it is less likely that autoimmune patients will flare with the immune-supportive regimen that works more with the body rather than force it into overactivity.

\*Identifying factors of the patient have been altered to maintain anonymity.

Julie T. Chen, MD, is board-certified in internal medicine and is also fellowship-trained and board-certified in integrative medicine. She has her own medical practice in San Jose, CA; is the medical director of corporation wellness at several Silicon Valley-based corporations; is on several medical expert panels of websites as well as nonprofit organizations; is a recurring monthly columnist for several national magazines; and has been featured in radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews. She incorporates healing modalities into her practice, including but not limited to medical acupuncture, Chinese scalp acupuncture, clinical hypnotherapy, strain-counterstrain osteopathic manipulations, and biofeedback.

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