

# Doctor Winters Says Let Your Baby Eat Dirt for Better Immunity

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By [Nasha Winters](#)

*Dr. Nasha Winters is a licensed Naturopathic Doctor and a globally recognized integrative cancer researcher. In this article, she writes about why we need to expose babies and young children to a diversity of microbes and germs, and yes even dirt, to help improve their immune system. Read on to learn why a strong immune system is key to good health and 7 ways you can help your children have immune systems that can keep them healthy.*

## A Strong Immune System is Key To Maintaining Good Health

Our immune system plays a key role in [helping us stay healthy](#). It is in charge of recognizing and responding to bacteria, viruses, parasites, and other unwanted visitors in the body. Our immune system is also responsible for recognizing and eliminating abnormal cells, including pre-cancerous and cancerous cells. It's our body's surveillance system.

In order to protect us, immune cells must be able to distinguish between healthy cells and damaged or infected cells. And immune cells need to be trained how to do this from an early age. The way to do this is to expose these cells to germs, also called microbes, which are part of what is known as the [human microbiome](#). Specifically, the microbiome refers to the trillions of bacteria, fungi, and other microorganisms that live within and on the surfaces of the human body. These microorganisms on our skin, mucous membranes, and throughout our digestive tracts affect our digestive and metabolic health. More importantly, they play the vital role of coach for the immune system.

Our focus on staying clean and over-treating illness weakens the immune system

Humans have evolved for millions of years in a symbiotic relationship with the microorganisms that make up our microbiome. For most of that time, we have worn no shoes, used no antibacterial soaps, and taken no antibiotics. Only in recent decades have we shifted to living in sterile environments. We now avoid childhood infections with immunizations, we suppress fevers with medications, and we pasteurize our food.

Unfortunately, by taking all of these extensive precautions, we are killing the microbial ecosystems and germs that our babies need in order to develop balanced and [healthy immune systems](#) that will support them through childhood and into adulthood. Our immune systems are exhausted, confused, and depleted because of a lack of microbial exposure from routine vaccinations, fever suppression, antibiotic use, nutrient depletion, and other stressors of modern times. This is affecting our children's health and immune system, making them weaker and more susceptible to illness and serious diseases like cancer.

## Hygiene Hypothesis

This concept is the foundation of the hygiene hypothesis, which is the theory that many modern illnesses result from our living in too sterile conditions. When the immune system is not primed by exposure to germs during the early years of life, it never properly learns how to balance its various responses. This causes a disruption in the function of the immune system, leading to allergies, autoimmune diseases, and cancer. Allergies occur when there is an over-response of the immune system to what should be harmless substances. Autoimmune diseases occur when the immune system fails to differentiate between foreign invaders and regular body cells. And cancer occurs when a weakened immune system is unable to keep abnormal cells in check.

In fact, this overly clean idea has been used to explain the rise of acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, the most common cancer in children. In May of 2018, a professor at the [Institute of Cancer Research in London](#) proposed a new and “unified” theory for the cause of childhood leukemia, specifically that infections trigger leukemia in children who have been kept overly sanitary and clean in their early years. The children who develop cancer after exposure to common infections are the children whose immune systems have not been exposed to a diverse set of bacteria, viruses, or other microbes during the first year of life—microbes that are ubiquitous in daycare centers, breast milk, animal dander, and plain old dirt.

In other words, children need germs. Babies and young children need to be exposed to a diversity of microbes early in life to keep their immune systems strong and help them fight against illness. However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't be cautious. There is a fine line between protecting our babies from infectious disease and giving them exposure to the germs that will train their immune systems for lifelong health. Of course, I still recommend keeping up with basic sanitary practices like washing our hands with soap and warm water, or sneezing into our elbows. However, there are things we can do to expose our children to natural sources of microbes that will strengthen their immune system and improve their health.

## 7 Ways To Strengthen Your Children's Immune System

Here are 7 actionable steps you can take to train your child's immune system to help your child be healthier for the long term.

### 1. Get Outside

A [recent survey](#) sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that Americans spend 87% of their time inside enclosed buildings. Another 6% of their time is spent inside vehicles. That leaves a mere 7% of their time to be outdoors. That's unfortunate because it's outside where we encounter the broadest range of microbes. When babies and children play outside, they get dirt on their fingers, dirt on their faces, and even a bit of dirt in their mouths. These mini inoculations are the coaches the immune system needs to mature. So, go ahead and let your baby eat dirt.

### 2. Breastfeed

Breast milk is not sterile, and that is why it makes for a great natural source of bacteria for your baby. Breast milk is also rich in Lactobacillus bacteria that act as beneficial probiotics for the baby's developing immune system. Babies also encounter the natural bacteria on their mother's skin through the process of snuggling and nursing. And studies show that [breastfeeding may be protective](#) against childhood leukemia and lower risk of [asthma and allergies](#). Try to breastfeed your child for at least 6 months if possible.

### 3. Get a pet

Living on a farm is one way to be regularly exposed to the naturally occurring microbes in the soil. Of course, not everyone lives on a farm, but your child can get exposure to microbes by simply having a pet. Although an animal in the home can trigger allergies in some people, exposure to pets during infancy can actually decrease the risk of developing allergies in the long run. Indeed, studies show that children who live with a [dog or a farm animal](#) have a lower risk of developing allergies and asthma in early childhood.

### 4. Let Fevers Run Their Course

Fevers are a sign of a strong immune system that is mounting a reaction to infection. However, since the 1970s and 1980s, we have routinely suppressed fevers in children. I believe that part of coaching and training the developing immune system is allowing the body to have a natural fever. If your child's fever is below 102.5, keep the baby comfortable with cool washcloths and allow it to run its course. Simply let the body fight the infection and this will help to strengthen your child's immune system for the future.

## 5. Limit Antibiotic Use and Exposure

Overusing antibiotics is one of the most direct assaults to a baby's microbiome and developing immune system. Broad-spectrum antibiotics wipe out not only the bacteria that cause disease but also the beneficial bacteria in the [gut microbiome](#). Limit your child's antibiotic intake to only if it is absolutely necessary.

And exposure to antibiotics can occur not only from a prescribed medication but also from eating meat, eggs, and dairy products from conventionally raised animals. Choosing organic animal products is the best way to avoid antibiotics in the food you eat and give to your baby.

## 6. Avoid Hand Sanitizers

Antibacterial sprays, wipes, and sanitizers have become the norm. A study of US children found that those with the [highest level of exposure to triclosan](#), a common antibacterial agent commonly found in sanitizers, also had the highest risk for airborne and food allergies. There's no need to meticulously sanitize your hands with antibacterial products. The best way to wash your hands (and those of your child) is with good, old-fashioned soap and water.

## 7. Replenish the Beneficial Microbes

Human diets have traditionally been microbial rich, however today, we eat foods that have been triple-washed and sealed in cellophane wrappers. We need to replenish the beneficial microbes to help strengthen our children's immune system. Infants can be given probiotic powders even before they are old enough to eat solid foods. These probiotic powders include a variety of *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacteria* species that support a healthy microbiome and immune system. Additionally, as your children get older, they can consume more beneficial microbes by eating [fermented foods](#), such as yogurt, kefir, and sauerkraut.

So, to all the parents and guardians out there who want to support their children's immune system and health, don't be afraid to let your child go outside, or go to daycare, or play with the dog. Being exposed to germs is good for your children and their immunity, and can help them have a healthy future.

## **Want to read more?**

[How My Mother Survived Stage-4 Breast Cancer: An Excerpt from Dr. Josh Axe's "Eat Dirt"](#)

[The Microbiome 101: Your Gut Health Explained](#)

[For This Mom, A Sudden Food Allergy Reaction Changed Everything](#)