



Boosting Your Immune System

Your immune system protects your body from germs that can cause infections and diseases.

There are many things that can lead to a weakened immunity including underlying medical conditions, certain medications, excessive weight, and a sedentary lifestyle. Having a strong immune system can give you an edge in staying healthy.

Since 80% of our immune system is in our gut, eating healthy is key to staying healthy. It is



important to eat fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and healthy fats found in fish and nuts.¹ Vitamins such as vitamin C and zinc found in foods or supplements can also help. Since medications can have adverse reactions to some supplements, be sure to talk to your doctor before taking any vitamins or minerals.²

One of the most important things you can do to improve your immune system is to vaccinate. Vaccines help strengthen the immune system by helping the body fight illnesses and serious diseases. This is especially crucial for babies and children where most vaccines offer long-lasting or lifetime protection.³ Adults should stay up-to-date on their vaccines by visiting their doctor or pharmacist.

Eating healthy and getting vaccinated are not the only ways to a healthier you. More ways to boost your immune system include:

1. **Get enough sleep:** When your body doesn't get enough sleep, you increase your risk of getting sick. Your body releases cytokines when you sleep, which are needed to fight infections and inflammation. Adults need at least 7 hours of sleep a night, teens 8–10 hours, and young children 14 hours.⁴

2. **Get moving:** Physical activity improves blood circulation, which helps your immune system do its job more efficiently. It also helps you maintain a healthy weight. Aim for 30–60 minutes of moderate physical activity a day.⁵
3. **Stop smoking:** Smoking reduces immune defenses and lowers protective antioxidants (such as vitamin C) in the blood, increasing susceptibility to infections. Stay away from second-hand smoke since it has many of the same adverse effects.⁵
4. **Skip the alcohol:** Drinking alcohol reduces the number of antibodies needed to fight infection and slows how your body responds to the infection.⁵
5. **Manage stress:** Stress can weaken your immune system, therefore increasing the risk of infections. Practice relaxing activities such as reading, swimming, walking, meditation, yoga, or take a nap. Just a few minutes a day can help support your immunity.⁶
6. **Wash hands frequently:** Germs can spread from surfaces you touch, people, pets, or food. Wash your hands frequently by using clean water and soap for at least 30 seconds. If you use a hand sanitizer, choose one with at least 60% alcohol.⁷

Taking care of yourself will help your immune system take care of you. ●

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/communication/weakened-immune-systems.html>

² https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/library/features/diabetes_immune_system.html

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/features/enhance-immunity/>

⁴ <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/fight-off-the-flu-with-nutrients>

⁵ <https://healthmatters.nyp.org/7-ways-to-boost-your-immune-system/>

⁶ <https://www.allinahealth.org/healthysetgo/prevent/six-ways-to-boost-your-immunity-before-you-get-sick>

⁷ <https://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2018/10/handwashing-matters/>

Living With Diabetes

There are more than 37 million (about 1 in 10) Americans living with diabetes.¹ Diabetes occurs when your body does not make enough insulin to control your body's blood sugar (glucose) level. High blood sugar promotes prediabetes or diabetes. Most forms of diabetes are chronic and are manageable with medications and/or lifestyle changes.²

There are four common types of diabetes:

- ◆ **Prediabetes:** Blood glucose levels higher than normal but not high enough to be diagnosed with diabetes.
- ◆ **Type 1 diabetes:** An autoimmune disease where the immune system destroys insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. Usually diagnosed in children and young adults but can develop at any age.³
- ◆ **Type 2 diabetes:** The most common type of diabetes, affecting mostly adults where the body does not produce enough insulin, or the body is resistant to insulin.
- ◆ **Gestational diabetes:** Develops during pregnancy and goes away within six weeks of childbirth. Women with gestational diabetes are at a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes later in life.⁴

What can you do?

Diabetes can cause health issues such as heart disease, chronic kidney disease, nerve damage, hearing loss, vision loss, and more. You can take steps to help prevent or delay the onset. There is no cure for diabetes, but it can be controlled if managed correctly.

Daily tips to help manage diabetes:

- ◆ **Take your medicines:** Take medication at the right time, and in the right amount as prescribed by your doctor, even when you feel good.
- ◆ **Check your blood sugar:** Check your blood sugar several times a day as directed by your doctor. Keep a record of your numbers and share them with your

healthcare provider at your next visit.

- ◆ **Physical activity:** Get at least 30 minutes of physical activity five days a week, such as a brisk walk or riding a bike.
- ◆ **Eat healthy foods:** Eat the right amounts throughout the day to give you the nutrition you need and to help your blood sugar stay in your target range. Avoid added sugars and processed starches.



- ◆ **Control your blood pressure:** Your blood pressure should not exceed 130/80.⁵
- ◆ **Keep a check on your feet:** Let your doctor know immediately if you have any cuts, redness, swelling, or other changes to the skin or nails.
- ◆ **Keep regular doctor appointments:** Be sure to see your doctor regularly and do not miss appointments or lab tests.

PEEHIP and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama want you to live the healthiest life possible. For more information on living with diabetes, go to [CDC.gov](https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/data/statistics-report/index.html). ●

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/data/statistics-report/index.html>

² <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/7104-diabetes>

³ <https://www.webmd.com/diabetes/diabetes-basics>

⁴ <https://www.webmd.com/diabetes/diabetes-basics>

⁵ <https://www.webmd.com/diabetes/diabetes-basics>

Value of Prior Authorizations

Prior authorization (PA) is one of the most common drug utilization management tools in the U.S. healthcare system. It involves a process where clinicians (e.g., physicians, providers, etc.) provide additional information to determine if the medication is covered. The purpose of prior authorizations in the pharmacy benefit is to ensure the requested drug therapy is medically necessary, clinically appropriate, and aligns with the most up-to-date evidence-based guidelines. The benefits of prior authorizations include the following:

- ◆ **Clinically Appropriate Drug Selection:** The backbone of all PA coverage criteria is adopted from the approval decisions and data reviewed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In order for a drug to obtain approval by the FDA, it must prove that its benefits for the target condition and population outweigh its potential risks.¹ For that reason, prior authorizations are designed to align with the clinical data that led to the FDA approval as much as possible. In cases where a drug is prescribed for an established off-label use, clinical trials, peer-reviewed literature, and consensus guidelines by clinical experts (including healthcare providers and administrators) are used in the construction of PA coverage criteria.

In recent years, an innumerable amount of new drugs and new research are feeding into and rapidly reshaping medical practice guidelines. Such a dynamic landscape makes it extremely challenging for prescribers to stay up-to-date with the latest clinical practice guideline changes. For that reason, the intent of prior authorizations is to partner with prescribers to promote appropriate drug use in the patient population for whom safety and efficacy has been established.

- ◆ **Promotion of Safe Drug Use:** Prescription drug abuse is a growing health and economic burden on the U.S. healthcare system. Drug overdoses have claimed over 933,000 lives over the past 21 years in the United States, and, unfortunately, it continues to worsen.² Prior authorizations may help to curb this epidemic by providing opportunities for early intervention. Opioid PA coverage, for example, may require submission of appropriate diagnosis or attestation from the prescriber when claims data show there is duplicative opioid therapy or concurrent opioid and benzodiazepine therapy.

- ◆ **Maximization of Therapy Effectiveness:** Recent pharmaceutical innovation brought about a boom in biologic medicines, which accounted for 40% (15 out of 37) of all FDA approvals in 2022.³ Therapeutic biological products, ranging from gene therapy, immune modulators, monoclonal antibodies, growth factors, and blood products, come with higher prices as they require a delicate manufacturing process via living sources. New innovative drugs often mean new treatment options for patients with diseases that were once considered non-curable. However, more and more products are found to be only effective on patients with specific genes as these medications target specific molecules in the human body. In spite of FDA approvals that outline the target population for biologics based on their clinical trial results, studies are finding surprisingly low genetic testing rates for cancer patients who may benefit.⁵ The prior authorization process can be particularly effective in promoting better health outcomes for patients by requiring recommended lab tests as part of the criteria. The goal of such a requirement is to guide both the patient and provider to a therapy with the best prognosis based on the testing results, and to minimize wasteful spending in healthcare for ineffective or potentially harmful therapies.

Although the prior authorization process could be deemed cumbersome, it serves as a line of defense to prevent harmful drug interactions, adverse events, duplicate therapy, or off-label use of drugs for diagnoses that lack supporting clinical evidence. In summary, the value of a PA review is to ensure that the right patient gets the right drug for the right diagnosis, which can ultimately help improve patient outcomes. ●

¹ U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Drug development and approval process. <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/development-approval-process-drugs#FDA>

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Opioid overdose: Rx Awareness. Updated October 24, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/rxawareness/about/index.html>

³ U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [(accessed on 1 January 2023)] <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/development-approval-process-drugs/new-drugs-fda-cders-new-molecular-entities-and-new-therapeutic-biological-products>

⁴ Innocenti F, Cox NJ, Dolan ME. The use of genomic information to optimize cancer chemotherapy. *Semin Oncol.* 2011 Apr;38(2):186-95. doi: [10.1053/j.seminoncol.2011.01.005](https://doi.org/10.1053/j.seminoncol.2011.01.005). PMID: 21421109; PMCID: PMC3076508.

⁵ Pritchard D, Goodman C, Nadauld LD. Clinical Utility of Genomic Testing in Cancer Care. *JCO Precis Oncol.* 2022 Jan;6:e2100349. doi: [10.1200/PO.21.00349](https://doi.org/10.1200/PO.21.00349). PMID: 35085005; PMCID: PMC8830511.

Medicare-Eligible PEEHIP Members

The information below pertains to Medicare-eligible PEEHIP retirees or Medicare-eligible dependents of PEEHIP retirees. For more information, visit rsa-al.gov/peehip/retirees/.



Your 2024 Plan Coverage

If you are currently enrolled in the PEEHIP UnitedHealthcare® Group Medicare Advantage (PPO) Plan, you do not need to do anything to remain in the plan for 2024. Your coverage will automatically continue. In mid-November, you should have received the Formulary

Change Notifications which details information about prescription drug coverage. In late November, you should have received the Annual Notice of Changes which is a summary of updates to your plan costs and benefits.

If you have any questions about your plan benefits, call UnitedHealthcare® toll-free at 877.298.2341, TTY 711, 8 a.m. – 8 p.m. local time, Monday – Friday or visit retiree.uhc.com/peehip.

Rally Coach™ Programs

Get help living a healthier, happier life with Rally Coach™ programs at no additional cost.

◆ Real Appeal®

Online lifestyle and weight loss program designed to help you gain energy, feel your best, and reduce the risk of developing health conditions. Each week you will learn how to create healthy habits and stay motivated so you can achieve your long-term goals. Sign up if you are ready to change your health for good.

◆ Real Appeal® Diabetes Prevention

Online lifestyle program designed to help you lose weight, gain energy, feel your best, and reduce your risk of developing diabetes. The program focuses on helping you change your habits for good and stay accountable so you can achieve your long-term health goals. You must qualify by the CDC standards to enroll. For more information about Real Appeal® and Real Appeal® Diabetes Prevention, call 844.924.7325, TTY 711.

◆ Wellness Coaching

Online and live coaching support that provides access to a variety of digital health and wellness courses. For Wellness Coaching, call 800.478.1057, TTY 711.



◆ Quit For Life®

A tobacco cessation program designed to give you a clear path to quitting and remaining nicotine-free. Through an online dashboard, you can phone, text, or chat to get the support you need. For Quit for Life®, call 866.QUIT.4LIFE, TTY 711.

Get started today! To learn more, visit rallyhealth.com/retiree. ●