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COVID-19. SOME THOUGHTS FROM A NUTRITIONIST..

I have been planning to write something on here re COVID and mental health for a while. So, here's my penny's worth - from the perspective of someone who had a very acute, serious mental health illness after the birth of their first son, and who is also a qualified health practitioner of 15 years (with a BSC hons degree in nutrition) .

BANT makes specific supplement recommendations for the general public as protection against COVID complications

As someone who always seeks to use *science as an evidence base* for her clients' treatment I was interested to learn what BANT (British Association of Nutritional Therapists) - one of the professional bodies that registered nutritional therapists might belong to -had to say on the subject of COVID. They have recommended that the general public take **Vitamin C (around 1g a day)** and **vitamin D3 (minimum of 600-800iu a day)** as a precaution to support immune resilience, increasing to a therapeutic dose of 5,000iu of vitamin D a day if you develop COVID-19 (1). These are safe and inexpensive supplements.

Vitamin D insufficiency is common in winter and there appears to be a correlation with low vitamin D levels and acute respiratory distress in SARS-Cov-2 infections. BANT has stated that :

“ A recent large meta-analysis (looking at 10,933 people in 25 trials), showed that vitamin D supplementation reduced the risk of cold and flu patients developing acute respiratory infections (ARIs) from 60% to 32% (2). Similarly, hospital data on early intervention with Vitamin D supplementation in SARS-CoV-2 infections reduced severity of the infection and lowered ICU admissions (3).” Vitamin C also helps reduce inflammatory cytokines, reducing the duration and severity of infection (4).

Nutritional therapy is not simply just a case of taking a couple of supplements, we put together bespoke programmes based on the detailed assessments we make on the underlying causes for our clients' ill-health. (An issue, I come up against, when friends call me with a particular health condition and ask me to recommend some supplements. Each person's condition is different and needs to be explored from a holistic and functional medical perspective) However, in this case, BANT does feel this is warranted, in order to provide a level of protection to the general public at this extraordinary time, as part of a wider prevention strategy for COVID-19.

We must not underestimate this virus and we need to protect our vulnerable, and not let this divide us. But I do strongly feel that we need to strike a balance. My big concern is peoples' mental health and I am seeing this with my clients in my work (ever more cases of overwhelm, burn-out, anxious individuals) and it's not really surprising at this time of profound

uncertainty. So many people are scared. (Yes, there are those on the other side of the coin who think it's a made-up illness, but disregarding those for a second).

We know, that there are sadly so many more suicides from the lack of connection/community, from the high stakes and the constant fight or flight response that come from our nervous system being primed by the constant updates and scary stories. And it's affecting our **youngsters**. My concern is that it's just not healthy, nor is it sustainable. This compromises our immune system, gut health, mental health. We are also social beings who need connection.

Plus, so little advice is being given about how to protect ourselves by balancing our immune response to viral threats through our diets and lifestyle.

I personally have nothing against appropriate use of vaccines, they can be bloody marvellous. And let's face it, vaccines have saved millions of lives. My boys had all their childhood vaccinations, so I would be thrilled if this new vaccine can protect the vulnerable. Time will tell. But, given we can't even cure the common cold I am sceptical but hopeful nonetheless.

For those who sadly die or get seriously acutely ill from COVID, however, we know that the risk factors include vitamin D deficiency, being overweight, diabetes, having a poor diet and a sedentary lifestyle. Largely, these are factors that are modifiable.

Long Covid

And it's not just that, many individuals are now ending up with long Covid. This can significantly reduce quality of life and be very unpleasant- I've had enough clients with post-viral fatigue and experience of it myself to truly appreciate the suffering they endure. And this is largely because they are already quite depleted (nutritional deficiencies /physically, mentally worn out/ highly stressed/or have unresolved gut and immune imbalance such as auto-immunity/trauma etc) and have dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system and the hypothalamic-pituitary- adrenal axis from chronic stress. So, adding the huge burden of the virus means they can't cope with the load and their immune system can get stuck in an inflammatory response and the nervous system goes further out of whack which rewires their brain and bodies. It can literally be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Hand sanitizers

And in terms of **hand sanitizers**, we must definitely use them. I do. But please use them judiciously if you can, and perhaps not in an obsessive way that I have seen some of my anxious friends do.

Otherwise, long term if we have to live with COVID-19 (or similar viruses), our skin microbiome will be so disrupted, that it will cause a whole host of problems of antibiotic resistance and dysbiosis in our microbiome. We know from the scientific literature this is associated with a host of potential chronic conditions. For more info, see for example- <https://www.popsoci.com/is-hand-sanitizer-bad-for-my-microbiome/>

Ultimately, we have to all do our bit to protect our families, each other and our precious NHS, but NOT at the total expense of our mental health and in a way that potentially scars our youngsters 😞. So, I urge you to strike a well-thought out balance, one which is both healthy for our mental and physical well-being and that of your children.

Lifestyle choices, dietary choices, connection and movement

We as humans also need connection, movement, purpose and sunlight to stay well and this can become more challenging in lockdown, so do get outdoors in the daytime, keep up communication with friends and your local community, exercise regularly, get adequate sleep and ask for help if you need it and employ stress management techniques if you feel overwhelmed.

And just as importantly, reconsider unhealthy behaviours, like over-reliance upon alcohol and excessive sugar consumption. Sugar is very addictive, very inflammatory and eating too much processed and highly palatable junk food -devoid of nutrients, coupled with a sedentary lifestyle will fuel obesity and increase risk of chronic disease including mental health conditions and may lead to COVID complications. Eat more unprocessed wholefoods, vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds, pulses to support our gut microbiome, a healthy brain and body. It's the foundation of our health, after all.

Over-stimulation from news programmes

Minimise news consumption too if you can. Alarmist media stories will increase our stress hormones, deregulating our immune system and leaving us in a state of chronic stress. Ideally you should avoid listening/reading the news before bed on your telephone or other devices and also don't have every COVID update pinging on your iPhone every few hours. Being in this constant agitated state, maintains a higher level of stress hormones that eventually take a toll on our health and lowers our resilience.

And if you are feeling overwhelmed, please note - if of interest to anyone, I have a track record that I am extremely proud of, of helping my clients with anxiety/chronic stress and all their associated symptoms, as well as chronic fatigue (amongst other things) in a pragmatic way via dietary changes, lifestyle medicine and bespoke supplementation. But there are many things you can do for yourself to calm down your stress response, including walking in nature,

listening to calming music, singing, burning aromatherapy oils, using an app like Calm, doing yoga, mindfulness or meditation, having baths with Epsom salts, deep-breathing and writing a gratitude diary. Also, you need to consider what brings you joy in life and embrace that (totally unique to each person) but for me - it's my connection with friends, laughter, netball, dancing, house music, my boys, my wonderful husband, nature but also my splendid urban backdrop and fabulous local community 😊

Thanks for reading and do share with friends and family. It could even save someone's life.

https://bant.org.uk/2020/10/20/bant-recommends-extraordinary-measure-of-vitamin-c-and-vitamin-d-supplementation/?fbclid=IwAR3S94_VPHOY8gLKt2uYEYj9OvGi21xcFMOVDi8NzQ9YP9drVskXjOszXBQ

- Evidence that Vitamin D Supplementation Could Reduce Risk of Influenza and COVID-19 Infections and Deaths, 2020, <https://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/12/4/988>
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