Spring is here!! It is always so nice this time of year to watch the flowers start to bloom and the grass start to grow. However, for allergy sufferers, the spring season can also be very difficult time of year as one of the most common allergens, pollen, becomes airborne.

Although symptoms rarely begin before five years of age, many children suffer from seasonal allergies. A common cause of seasonal allergies in children is a decreased immune system. The role of the immune system is to recognize foreign invaders and mount an attack against them. The immune system takes time to develop as it learns to recognize what is foreign to the body. It can take about two years for your baby's immune system to fully mature. In order to help prevent seasonal allergies, it is helpful for children to have their immune system strengthened and to stabilize the portion of their immune system that responds to significant allergens (pollens, dust, molds, etc). This article will discuss some approaches parents can take in the early years to strengthen their child's immune system in an attempt to decrease the incidence and severity of seasonal allergies.

Stabilization of the immune system begins in utero. Your baby relies on the immunity she took from you through the placenta, so it is wise to build up your own immune system prior to your pregnancy. When your baby is born, she obtains more immunity via her passage through the birth canal. Following this, she gets many antibodies from your colostrum and breast milk. This is one of the benefits that result from exclusively breastfeeding your baby, even if it is for only a short period of time. Formula does not provide any antibodies or immune support and in fact, formula itself can be a potential allergen. Therefore, if possible, avoid supplementing with formula during the very beginning of your child's life, as this is the most crucial time of immune system development.

A new and immature immune system needs time to develop the necessary components to deal with foreign invaders. Therefore, a child's immune system needs exposure to bacteria, viruses, fungus and other pathogens in order to become stronger. The more the immune system is challenged, the stronger it gets – a little dirt and a few germs are not necessarily bad things. It is perfectly normal for young children to have many colds and coughs in the first years of life. If your child gets a cold or a cough, and does not develop a secondary infection such as a chest or ear infection, then their immune system is doing its job.

A weak digestive system will also increase a child's susceptibility to seasonal allergies. At birth, your baby’s digestive system is permeable (i.e. leaky gut), meaning it is comprised of little holes throughout the small intestine. This is a very good thing, as it allows maximum absorption of nutrients from breastmilk and formula. Although the main reason for this leaky gut is to absorb nutrients, the downside is that it also allows food particles that have not been broken down to pass through into the blood stream. Your body recognizes these as 'foreign' and creates antibodies against them, and a food allergy begins. This is one of the main reasons not to introduce highly allergenic foods, such as wheat and dairy, too early as they can weaken a child's immune system and make them more susceptible to seasonal allergies. As your child gets older, these holes begin to get patched up, and with this stronger digestive system, there is less potential for allergies. Delaying introduction of potential food allergens can help keep the digestive tract healthy and facilitate proper functioning of the immune system.

In summary, below are some key steps parents can take to aid in the development of their child's immune system, thus helping to decrease the incidence and severity of seasonal allergies.

1. **Breastfeed.** Breastfeeding is the best way to increase your child's immune system. It provides
antibodies, vitamins and minerals, and nourishment.

2. **Probiotics.** Probiotics are important to use in pregnancy and very early in a child’s life. They support good bacteria colonization and assist in normal development of the immune system. Probiotics are especially important if mother and child require antibiotics during pregnancy or breastfeeding. In this case, probiotics should be taken during and after the antibiotics.

3. **Allow the digestive system to develop.** Delay introduction of solid foods until at least six months of age. Some people choose to wait a little longer if they have a family history of food allergies. It is also beneficial to delay introduction of the most common food allergies – dairy, wheat, soy, corn, eggs, nuts and fish – until after your baby turns one year of age.

4. **Support the immune system through vitamins, minerals and herbs.** There are many vitamins (e.g. A, C, E, etc), minerals (e.g. selenium, zinc etc) and herbs (e.g. Astragalus) that support the immune system. It would be beneficial to speak with a health professional when deciding which vitamins, minerals and herbs would work best for you and your child.

*This article was written by Susan Joyce, a Naturopathic Doctor in Peterborough. Susan loves helping children improve their health.*