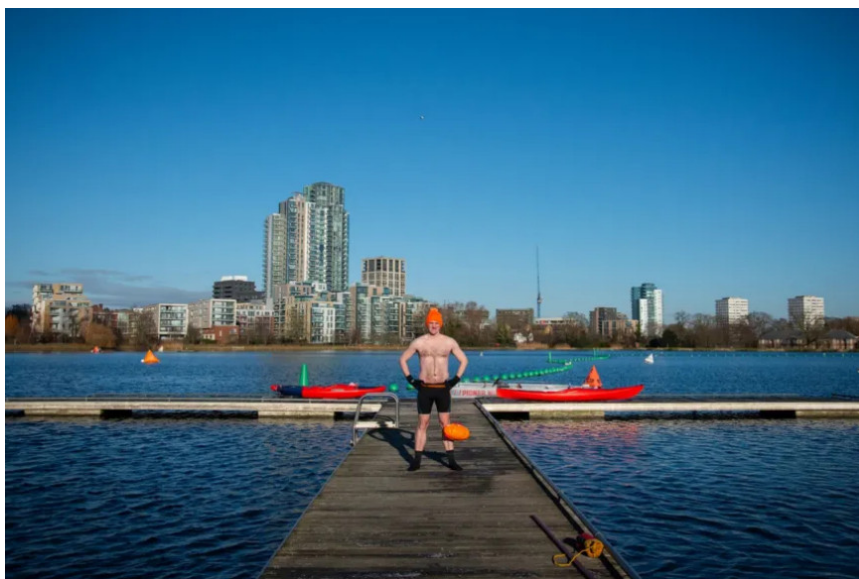




## Vitamin pills and icy swims: Can you really boost your immune system?



And I feel like I've left my sanity as well as my warm clothes in the changing room as I stride out to the edge of a reservoir in my swim shorts.

Vitamin pills and icy swims: Can you really boost your immune system? And I feel like I've left my sanity as well as my warm clothes in the changing room as I stride out to the edge of a reservoir in my swim shorts. A brightly-coloured chalk sign informs me that the water temperature today is a chilly 3.9C, as one of the regulars tells me this is not cold water swimming, it's "ice" water swimming. How did I end up here?

Well, I've become enthralled by the idea of enhancing or boosting the immune system. My body has been the living embodiment of the "quademic" that the NHS spent all winter warning us about. It's been a relentless stream of colds and coughs and one explosive tummy. Our immune systems already do a fantastic job fighting viruses and other nasties. If I collected all the air I breathed out over the course of a minute it would contain 100 to 10,000 bacteria, 25,000 viruses and a single fungus, according to Prof John Tregoning, immunologist at Imperial College London. You're breathing these things in all the time, there's just a swirling mass of pathogens [organisms that cause disease] in the air," he says. But there's plenty of foods, supplements and activities that are touted for their "immune-boosting" properties. Can we dial up our protection?

And that's why I find myself wading out and pushing off for a chilling blast of breaststroke. The icy water is like fire on my skin and all my brain can think of is making it to the pontoon without needing help from the lifeguards. But studies have shown the adrenaline hit of the cold water does flood the blood stream with infection-fighting cells.

White blood cells – which could produce antibodies or attack infected tissue – move out of their normal homes and head out on patrol thinking there could be an infection. So does this mean I'm more protected? "Within a few hours that all goes back to normal," says Prof Eleanor Riley, an immunologist at the University of Edinburgh.