



## April 2026 Winter Resilience, Caring Communities, and the Amazing Vagus Nerve.



Kia ora koutou - What a topsy-turvy world we live in!

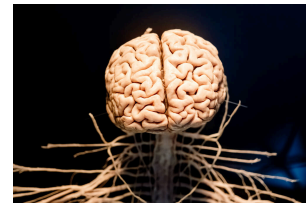
As I write, another “tropical river” of rain has drenched Northland, but today’s summer warmth offers a brief reprieve before winter’s chill, winds, and rise in respiratory infections. New Zealand is in its ninth COVID-19 wave — about 50 weekly hospitalisations in early March, mostly among older adults — though, thankfully, well below previous peaks. Influenza remains low for now but RSV, colds, pertussis (370 cases this year), and imported dengue are adding further pressure.

Be proactive: book your flu vaccine with Reception. Cough or cold symptoms mean Please Stay Home. Small steps such as using Vitamin D, and Betadine gargle or nasal rinse, help prevent serious illness and hospital admissions.

For after-hours urgent medical care, Eastcare A&E are now open till 1am each morning.

ONE-YEAR PRESCRIPTIONS are intended to reduce medical costs but will only be offered where it is clinically safe and appropriate. These prescriptions generally apply when your condition is stable, your medications have been unchanged for at least a year, and your key health markers (such as blood pressure, weight, and blood tests) remain within agreed targets. One-year repeats are not suitable for complex medical conditions, patients on

In this month's newsletter:



- Winter Health Protection - Flu Vax, Iodine, Vitamin D and Stay Home if Unwell
- Resilience in Communities in Times of Uncertainty
- Eastcare is now open till 1am.
- 12-month prescriptions and when they are appropriate
- Make the most of Consults
- Monitoring Heart Rate Variability

*and this month  
Dr Ric shares his reading about  
the "Amazing" Vagus Nerve  
and its impact on our wellbeing.*

multiple medications, or those taking controlled drugs. You can review the MMC [Repeat Prescription Policy](#) online

## Sadness and Loss

I've just returned from a wonderful Tasmanian vacation, where I was confronted with the stark history of convict life at Port Arthur and Strahan. What was missing, though, was the story of Australia's First Nations people. Reading [Dark Emu](#) reminded me how the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples — arriving 80,000 years ago, and reaching Tasmania 40,000 years ago — thrived through an Ice Age; they built homes, cultivated grains, irrigated land, and practised ecological stewardship. It's humbling to reflect that colonial "Darwinian" thinking — survival of the strongest — nearly destroyed them. Sadly, we haven't learned from history. Conflict in Europe continues, with ripple effects seen in oil prices and growing financial hardship; 21,000 Kiwis are now behind on mortgage repayments.

However, on the radio this week, I heard Northland's [Ōtetao Reti marae](#) leader speak about the remarkable resilience they've built since Cyclone Gabrielle in 2023 — installing solar power, independent water supplies, and storing emergency equipment. These steps have helped their marae act as a lifeline during floods, offering food and shelter to others. How can we build the same resilience in our own lives and neighbourhoods? Be kind — what goes around comes around. If you don't know your neighbours, start a conversation or form a small support group. Join a social network or faith community. And if times feel overwhelming, please don't hesitate to reach out to the Millhouse team. We're here to help.

## The Vagus Nerve and Wellbeing

In this month's main article, Dr Ric presents the vagus nerve, a "wandering" nerve in the body, which runs from the brain through the neck, chest, and abdomen, and plays a major role in the autonomic nervous system. He explains that when vagal tone is strong, the body is better able to shift into a "rest-and-digest" state, supporting steadier heart rate, reduced inflammation, improved stress resilience, and overall health. The variability factor in the heart rate is often used as a practical sign of how well this system is functioning.

The article particularly focuses on the research of Dr Kevin Tracey, presented in his biography 'The Great Nerve'. Tracy's work that the vagus nerve can actively suppress inflammation, opening the way to a new kind of treatment through electrical stimulation. It describes early experiments, clinical trials, and striking patient cases suggesting benefit in conditions such as Crohn's disease and rheumatoid arthritis, while also stressing that this field is still developing and that implanted devices can be costly. The article closes by listing everyday ways to support vagal tone, including slow breathing, exercise, good sleep, singing or humming, and newer non-invasive stimulation methods.

Ma te wa,  
Dr Richard J Coleman

## Boosting Vagal Function

**Simple ways to boost vagal tone**

Stimulating the vagus nerve can improve resilience, mood, and recovery, and may also help reduce inflammation.

Practical options include:

- **Meditation and mindfulness:** reduce inflammation and stress but do not directly stimulate the vagus.
- **Slow, deep breathing:** 5–6 breaths (inhale 4–5 seconds, exhale 6–7 seconds) per minute to activate "rest-and-digest" vagal pathways.
- **Gentle exercise and rest:** regular moderate activity with good recovery.
- **Good sleep:** 7–8 hours with consistent bedtime and minimal screens before sleep.
- **Temperature:** brief cold-water exposure or a warm bath can briefly engage the vagus.
- **Singing, humming, chanting, gargling:** simple activities that may strengthen vagal pathways.
- **Ear-based TNS devices:** emerging non-invasive tools being studied for vagal modulation.

### Monitoring your Heart Rate Variability:

The autonomic nervous system controls automatic functions like heart rate, breathing, digestion, and stress responses, balancing the "fight-or-flight" (sympathetic) and "rest-and-digest" (parasympathetic) branches. A useful window into this system is heart rate variability (HRV) — the variation in time between heartbeats.

In general, a higher HRV suggests better vagal tone, greater resilience, and healthier stress

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regulation. Many digital watches now track HRV, including Apple Watch, Samsung Watch, Garmin, and Fitbit.