

It's Winter: Let's Boost Your Immune System

Here we are in prime cold and flu season now, so I want to talk about things you can do to boost your immune system to help keep yourself healthy these cold months. We're all more susceptible to getting sick in the winter since we're spending more time in dry indoor environments where we have more exposure to other peoples' germs, and our protective mucous membranes are weakened when they are dried out. The winter can also increase our stress levels and interfere with our sleep and digestion, which leaves us even more vulnerable to illnesses. A less-than-optimal diet can lead to nutrient deficiencies, which in turn significantly weakens our immunity.

Here are some specific dietary components and lifestyle strategies that you may want to incorporate right now to give your immune system a little boost in defending itself against winter bugs:

1. Antioxidants

Antioxidants, specifically vitamins A, C, and E, are a key line of defense against immune system invaders since they keep our skin and outer mucous membranes healthy so they can block any germs that try to enter our bodies. They also help repair cells inside the body. Top food sources of vitamin A include carrots, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes, and kale. Good sources for vitamin C are red bell peppers, broccoli, kale, cantaloupe, citrus fruits, strawberries, and kiwi. And you can get vitamin E from nuts, sunflower and pumpkin seeds, avocado, and olive oil.

2. Vitamin D

Vitamin D plays an important role in immune system function; in fact, there is some evidence that people with the lowest levels of vitamin D are more likely to catch a cold. Really, the best sources of vitamin D are sunlight and supplements. But egg yolks, salmon, sardines, and tuna, as well as fortified mushrooms, milk, and cereal also contain some vitamin D. Honestly, it is very difficult to get adequate vitamin D through diet alone. Since it is almost impossible to get enough sun in the winter, you may want to consider a daily vitamin D3 supplement. The best way to determine your optimal dose is to have your physician test your blood levels and recommend a supplemental dose based on your current level.

3. Zinc, Iron, and Selenium

The next group of nutrients to focus on are the trace minerals Zinc, iron, and selenium. They are all immune-boosting minerals found together in egg yolks, whole grains, lentils, chicken, turkey, beef, fish, and seafood. They work together to help produce white blood cells and other immune-protecting cells. Our bodies only need small amounts of these nutrients (that's why they're called trace minerals), so it's not necessary to increase your portions of these foods or take supplements.

4. Beta Glucans

Beta glucans, a type of soluble fiber that enhances the immune system can be found in mushrooms and some whole grains, like oats and barley. Mushrooms, such as the shiitake, oyster, enoki, Portobello, and maitake varieties, are usually touted for their immune-boosting powers, and these large carbohydrate molecules are the reason. They may help increase the number and activity of immune cells and defend against bacteria and viruses that enter the system. Try making a satisfying pot of my Mushroom Barley Soup for a beta-glucan boost!

5. Probiotics

Something else to consider are probiotics. These are the live and active cultures found in yogurt and other fermented dairy products, like kefir. Certain probiotic cultures can help to strengthen the body's defenses by populating the gut with "good" bacteria. Our digestive tract is considered the largest immune organ in the body. Probiotic bacteria, as well as our stomach acid, can help to fight off germs we ingest. Taking a probiotic supplement or eating a good quality yogurt or kefir every day can help populate your gut with immune-enhancing bacteria. Look for dairy products that say "contains live and active cultures" on the container.

6. Water, Exercise & Sleep

You know, I have to put in a good word for water. Water is important for optimal hydration, which helps keep nasal passages and other mucous membranes moist so that they can act as barriers to bacterial and viral invaders. Water is also important for helping your immune system run smoothly. Drink plenty of water throughout the day.

The first is actually the most important recommendation of all. It's washing your hands frequently. Use soap and water and rub your hands together vigorously for 20 seconds (or sing "Happy Birthday" twice) to kill all the bacteria that can cause colds, flus, and diarrhea. Be mindful of what you touch and try to avoid touching your face, especially your mouth, nose, and eyes, as much as possible since they are common points of entry for infections.

The next recommendation for helping to maintain a healthy immune system is for moderate, regular exercise, especially yoga and walking. Both have stress-reduction benefits, which can help free up our immune systems to make more powerful disease-fighting cells. Yoga seems to be especially helpful for those prone to respiratory problems, like colds, asthma, allergies, and chest infections. If you're already sick though, try to stay out of the gym or yoga studio, since it's not kind to spread your germs and you may run down your immune system even more. Surprisingly, intense or prolonged workouts can actually weaken the immune system, so don't overdo it.

This final tip is the one I want to focus on. It's for getting adequate sleep since sleep helps your body repair itself and boost the number of killer cells your immune system makes to fight off illness. Even minor sleep deprivation can suppress our immune systems. Most of us need seven to nine hours of shut-eye each night. The best cold and flu protection is integral: try to eat a variety of nutritious foods, engage in regular aerobic exercise, drink plenty of water, attain adequate sleep each night, and have fun this winter season. Laughing can help boost your immune system, too!

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