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DIETARY TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

In the midst of respiratory illness season, you may be taking precautions to protect yourself and your family from these infections, including the flu, COVID-19, norovirus, and RSV. An effective way to prevent illness is to bolster your immune system through food. It's important to note that getting sick isn't entirely avoidable, and no specific food can prevent illness. However, incorporating certain foods and nutrients into your diet can give your immune system the support it needs to fight off infections and keep you healthy.

The Role of Diet in the Immune System

The body's immune system comprises a complex network of tissues, organs, and cells, such as white blood cells and antibodies, that defend against harmful infections and diseases. This means your immune system can prevent you from getting sick or help you recover from illnesses more quickly.

To function effectively, the immune system depends on micronutrients like vitamins and minerals, many of which are found in food. According to Harvard Medical School, research has revealed that the gut's microbiome plays a key role in immune function. Since the gut is a major site of immune activity, it's crucial to supply its microbiome with nutrients from food to maintain a strong immune system.

However, your body needs the right fuel for your immune system to work efficiently. If you primarily eat a diet that is lower in nutrients, such as one that consists of processed foods and minimal fruits and vegetables,

you could weaken your immune system due to malnutrition or micronutrient deficiencies. In addition, a poor diet can create imbalances in your gut's microbiome, which could lead to chronic inflammation. This can suppress your immune system, as chronic inflammation impairs nutrient absorption and deregulates the immune response. So it's crucial to eat the right foods to enhance your immune system rather than weaken it.

Tips for an Immune-boosting Diet

Eating a varied diet of nutrient-rich foods is a good way to ensure you get enough nourishment to help your body fend off illnesses. Here are dietary tips that can improve your immune system:

- **Prioritize vitamins and minerals.** These nutrients provide several benefits to the body's defenses, and they can be found in a balanced diet. However, if you have a deficiency, your primary care provider may recommend a supplement. According to the Mayo Clinic, the following micronutrients are key for the maintenance and function of the immune system:
 - **Iron** is an element of enzymes that are vital for cell function. This mineral is found in meat, beans, nuts, and fortified breakfast cereals.



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- **Vitamin A** helps keep skin and tissues healthy, preventing infection. Orange and red fruits contain vitamin A, as well as vegetables such as carrots and bell peppers.
- **Vitamin C** promotes antibody formation and the production, function, and movement of white blood cells. Citrus fruits and bell peppers are good sources of vitamin C.
- **Vitamin D** helps regulate antimicrobial proteins that can directly kill infectious pathogens. Food sources of this vitamin include fatty fish, eggs, and fortified dairy, but you can also get vitamin D from sunlight.
- **Vitamin E** is an antioxidant that protects cells from damage. This vitamin is found in nuts, seeds, vegetable oils, and peanut butter.
- **Zinc** promotes wound healing and supports immune response. Sources of zinc include meats, whole grains, milk, and some shellfish.
- **Focus on lean protein.** The amino acids in protein are important for immune cell production and repair. Lean proteins, including chicken and fish, are lower in saturated fat and cholesterol than red meat.
- **Incorporate spices and herbs.** In addition to adding flavor to your meals, some spices and herbs have anti-inflammatory and immune-boosting properties. These include garlic, ginger, and turmeric.
- **Consume healthy fats.** Foods such as fatty fish (e.g., salmon), nuts, and seeds contain healthy fats like omega-3s, which have anti-inflammatory properties.
- **Stay hydrated.** Drinking plenty of water is not only crucial for your overall health but also for immune function and nutrient absorption.
- **Limit alcohol consumption.** Excessive drinking can weaken your immune system by reducing the healthy bacteria in your gut and affecting immune cell production. This can leave you vulnerable to infections.
- **Avoid processed, sugary, and high-sodium foods.** Processed foods are typically lower in vitamins and minerals than unprocessed foods. Additionally, foods that are high in sodium or sugar may cause inflammation, harming the immune system. Focus on natural sugars, such as those found in fruit or honey, rather than excessive added sugar.
- **Eat probiotics.** Foods that contain probiotics, such as yogurt and fermented foods, can support your gut's microbiome.

Summary

The key to an immune-boosting diet is variety and balance. While no one food can prevent infections like the flu, you can give your immune system a leg up against illnesses by giving it the nutrients to stay strong. If you have dietary questions or concerns, reach out to a dietician or health care professional.