

Flu-fighting foods



Stay healthy this winter
with the help of these
immunity-boosting foods.

YOU'VE HAD YOUR FLU SHOT, stocked up on hand sanitizer and have been taking daily doses of vitamin C – you're ready for flu season. But while you were preparing your defences to battle the latest bug, did you consider the flu-fighting weaponry in your fridge?

Believe it or not, the difference between spending a week on the couch with a box of tissues and surviving cold and flu season could come down to diet. "The medicinal value of food for warding off illness has been acknowledged for thousands of years," says Kirsten Hartvig, a naturopathic doctor. "More recently, scientific research has discovered hundreds of beneficial nutrients in the foods we eat. By applying our knowledge of these nutrients and how they work to our diet, we can eat foods that boost our immune system and so help protect ourselves against a host of ailments."

So which foods will help keep you clear of the common cold? These six are just a few good places to start.

Sweet potatoes

More than just a Thanksgiving staple, this vibrant root vegetable is also a sweet way to strengthen your immunity. Sweet potatoes are abundant in beta carotene, an antioxidant found in orange-fleshed foods like pumpkin and carrots that gets converted into vitamin A. This vitamin is a key player in warding off illness, as it helps your skin and the mucous membranes in your nose and mouth stay healthy.¹ These are your first lines of defence when harmful bacteria try to invade your body.

Try it: Swap regular potatoes for baked sweet potato wedges, with a drizzle of olive oil and fresh rosemary.

Kale

You've heard plenty of buzz recently around the nutrient power of kale, but this trendy superfood is more than a fad when it comes to immunity. A cup of raw kale provides more than 100 per cent of your daily value of vitamin C, a nutrient that has long been synonymous with keeping colds at bay. Also, Hartvig says, kale contains bioflavonoids, disease-fighting antioxidants that stimulate immune function.

Try it: Not a fan of kale? Hide the taste by tossing it in smoothies and soups.

Kefir

Did you know? Approximately 80 per cent of our immune cells are located in the gut. This connection between digestive health and immunity is why kefir, or fermented milk, and other foods that offer probiotic benefits play

¹ www.umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/supplement/vitamin-a-retinol

a key role in keeping you clear of the common cold, says holistic nutritionist Joy McCarthy, CNP, RNCP. “Fermented foods help to nourish the good bacteria that call your gut home.” And here’s a bonus benefit: If you do get sick, a healthy balance of good bacteria from regularly eating fermented foods will help lessen the severity and shorten your time on the sofa.

Try it: Kefir is delicious on cereal or in smoothies. It comes in a variety of flavours, such as strawberry or vanilla, and is available in the dairy aisles of most major grocery stores.

Beans

You may have hidden them in your napkin as a kid, but it’s time to start embracing beans if you don’t want to catch your kid’s cold. Lentils, chickpeas and other legumes are host to an arsenal of nutrients that offer immune protection, says Hartvig, specifically folate, vitamins B6 and B5, zinc and iron. Aim for a half-cup serving per day, such as three-bean salad for lunch or some hummus at snack time.

Try it: Combine beans with a source of vitamin C (think tomatoes, kale or broccoli) to increase the amount of iron your body absorbs by 50 per cent.

Brazil nuts

Craving a snack? Reaching for a few Brazil nuts could keep you from using up sick days. “Brazil nuts are one of the richest natural sources of selenium and vitamin E,” says Hartvig, “two powerful antioxidants working synergistically, each improving the performance of the other to boost

immune-system function.” She adds that these nuts also deliver omega fatty acids and zinc, both of which have been linked to a stronger immune system.

Try it: Snacking on just two Brazil nuts a day is enough to boost selenium levels by up to 65 per cent, according to a study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.²

Salmon

Salmon and other oily fish are excellent sources of vitamin D. And when it comes to cold-combating vitamins, a growing body of research suggests vitamin D is the new C. A study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* found that participants with the lowest levels of vitamin D were the most likely to catch colds.³ “Vitamin D is a powerful nutrient because it enhances your immune system response,” says McCarthy. “This means your body is better able to identify and then destroy bacteria and viruses.”

Try it: If you’re vegetarian, you can get your daily dose of vitamin D from whole eggs and fortified dairy products. Vegan? Look for mushrooms grown in conditions using ultraviolet light.

Getting vaccinated and being diligent about washing your hands are excellent practices for helping you fight the flu, but don’t discount the immunity-boosting potential of everyday foods. Just be sure to get the green light from your doctor before making changes to your diet. We all get sick now and then, but good nutrition is always a prescription for feeling better and staying healthy. ■

² ajcn.nutrition.org/content/87/2/379.full ³ www.webmd.com/cold-and-flu/news/20090223/low-vitamin-d-levels-linked-to-colds



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