



Supporting Your Immune System with Nutrition

Amanda Thul, RD, LD

Eating to prevent illness is as hot a topic as ever right now. Between the global pandemic and being in the midst of cold and flu season, everyone is looking for what they should eat to stay healthy. The immune system is in charge of fighting off viral and bacterial infections. It is a complicated system and isn't entirely understood. We do know diet and nutrition status may have an impact on how strong your immune system is but the truth is there is no 1 food that can prevent any type of illness. There also is no food or diet that can "boost" your immune system despite all the labeling claims on foods/drinks. However, there are certain nutrients and things you can do to help keep your immune system strong and ready to fight off invaders.

Nutrients that we know that have a key role in supporting our immune system are vitamins A, D, E, & C along with zinc, selenium, copper, and iron. These nutrients have a variety of functions from being antioxidants to helping develop immune cells. Does that mean you need to supplement all of these nutrients to stay healthy? No. Most of these nutrients work best in our bodies when consuming them in food form and not pill form. Taking supplements also runs the risk of getting too much of a nutrient that can cause either toxicity of that nutrient or deficiency of another nutrient in your body. Dietary supplements may be appropriate if you have a known deficiency or restricting food groups from your diet and always make sure to work with your provider on what supplement is safe for you. For most people, the best line of defense is from eating a balanced diet to get all of these nutrients in.

Make fruits and vegetables the focal point of your plate. Select a variety of colors throughout the week ranging from deep red and orange produce to dark green and white-these provide plentiful immune-supporting nutrients. Produce can be fresh, canned, frozen, or dried and prepared in a variety of different ways. Complement the fruits and vegetables on your plate with whole grains and a 3-4oz serving of lean protein. Meat, poultry, fatty fish, nuts/seeds, and legumes are all great healthful sources of protein. Majority of our grain products are now offered in whole grain varieties. Look for bread, pasta, rice, cereal, crackers...among others that are whole grains. Incorporating dairy into your diet with cheese, cottage cheese, yogurt, or milk is especially important for nutrients like vitamin D. Consistently

eating a diet like this majority of the time can help reduce the inflammation in your body and helps give your immune system more of a fighting chance.

What about those “immune boosting” products? These have been around before COVID hit and are now more prevalent than ever. Yes, your immune system can be supported by making sure the immune cells have the nutrients available that it needs to put up a good fight, but food does not cause a “boost” of immune cells in your body. Most of these beverages and foods are advertised to target your fear and are not backed by science. Sure, they make healthier eating more exciting but aren’t necessary. They are usually geared toward your wallet and not your health. Please be very wary of these products and think twice before buying them. Always remember, consistent balanced eating is the way to go.

Keep in mind, at the end of the day, an infection is still an infection and illness cannot be completely avoided based solely on what you’re eating. Get all those great foods in, sleep well, keep your body moving, and follow other recommended precautions such as frequent hand washing, wearing a mask, and social distancing to give yourself the best chance at staying healthy.