

Eating for immunity

While many people are busy stocking up on immune boosters, vitamin C tablets and green juices, we put together a few ideas on the type of nourishment our bodies need during this “viral era”. Everyday eating does not have to be complicated and demanding. Focus on the four familiar food groups and choose healthy options within these groups to keep the immune system fighting fit!

- 1. Whole grains instead of refined starch** – *These include foods like whole-wheat bread, oats, brown rice, barley and popcorn.* These high-fibres foods lower cholesterol levels, the risk of diabetes and heart disease. These conditions are linked to chronic inflammation which suppresses the functioning of the immune system. Fibre is also the preferred fuel of the bacteria living in the colon. Keeping these bacteria well fed makes for a healthy gut – the place where more than 70% of our immune cells live!
- 2. Proteins** – *These include foods like eggs, tinned fish, beans, lentils, chickpeas, chicken and lean meat.* Lacking protein in our diets has detrimental effects on the cells responsible for a good immune system, increasing susceptibility to opportunistic infections. Protein sources are also rich in other nutrients which play a crucial role in strengthening immunity, such as vitamin D, zinc, selenium and Vitamin B6.
- 3. Healthy fats** – *These include foods like nuts, seeds, peanut butter, avocado, sunflower oil and fatty fish.* Both omega-6 and omega-3 fats have an important role in the immune system, particularly in regulating inflammation. Inflammation, often presented as the redness and swelling surrounding a wound, is a sign that our immune system is working. However, unhealthy lifestyle choices and chronic diseases like obesity and diabetes can cause persistent low levels of inflammation. This abnormal response suppresses the functioning of the immune system. Flax seeds, canola, walnuts and fatty fish are good sources of omega 3 fats.
- 4. Fruits and Vegetables** – Choose a range of fruits and vegetables daily to provide the body with the necessary vitamins needed for a good immune system.
Yellow-orange and dark green vegetables like sweet potato and spinach contain beta-carotene which is converted to vitamin A once in the body. Vitamin A is a crucial regulator of the immune system.
Fruits like bananas and starchy vegetables like potatoes are high in vitamin B6, which is needed during the onset of the immune response.
Citrus fruits and vegetables like oranges and tomatoes are rich in vitamin C. Eating plenty of foods rich in Vitamin C can shorten the duration of cold symptoms and reduce the risk of contracting a cold, mostly in highly active individuals.
Finally, most fruits and vegetables contain nutrients termed phytonutrients, present in tiny amounts and providing additional health benefits. These nutrients provide flavour and colour to foods, serve as antioxidants, and can help to calm chronic inflammation. Every colour typically means a different phytonutrient, so try to include them all!