

# How to Help Keep Your Immune System Healthy

*What can you do?* Take it a bite at a time. Good nutrition is essential to a strong immune system, which may offer protection from seasonal illness and other health problems. No one food or supplement can prevent illness but you may help support your immune system by including these nutrients in your overall eating plan on a regular basis.

Focusing on nutrient-rich foods and healthy lifestyle behaviors can help you and your family stay a step ahead of illness.

## Immune-Supporting Nutrients

The following nutrients play a role in the immune system and can be found in a variety of foods. Add some of the foods listed for each nutrient to your shopping cart:

- **Vitamin A** helps regulate the immune system and protect against infections by keeping skin and tissues in the mouth, stomach, intestines and respiratory system healthy. Get this vitamin as beta carotene from plant foods such as sweet potatoes, carrots, broccoli, spinach, red bell peppers, and tomatoes. Eggs or foods labeled "vitamin A fortified," such as milk or some cereals are other good sources.
- **Vitamin C** supports the immune system by stimulating the formation of antibodies. Include more sources of this healthy vitamin by choosing citrus fruits such as oranges, grapefruit and tangerines, peppers, tomatoes, berries, melons, baked potatoes, or foods fortified with vitamin C, such as some cereals.
- **Vitamin E** works as an antioxidant and may support immune function. Include vitamin E in your diet with fortified cereals, whole grains, sunflower seeds, almonds, vegetable oils (such as sunflower or safflower oil), hazelnuts and peanut butter
- **Zinc** helps the immune system work properly and helps wounds to heal. Zinc can be found in lean meats, poultry, fish and seafood, milk, yogurt, whole grain foods and products, wheat germ, tofu, dried beans, seeds and nuts.
- **Vitamin D** helps regulate the immune system and is found in fatty fish, some mushrooms and eggs. Milk and 100% juices that are fortified with vitamin D also are sources of this important nutrient.
- **Probiotics** are "good" bacteria that promote health. They can be found in cultured dairy products such as yogurt and kefir; and in fermented foods such as kombucha and kimchi.
- **Protein** plays a role in the body's immune system, especially for healing and recovery. Eat a variety of protein foods including fish and seafood, lean meat, poultry, eggs, dried beans, peas and lentils, Greek yogurt, milk, soy products, nuts and seeds.

## Focus on Balance

*What can you do?* To help keep your immune system healthy all year long, focus on a balanced eating plan, good handwashing, stress management, regular physical activity, and adequate sleep.

- Aim for five to seven servings of vegetables and fruits AND three servings of whole grains daily to get vitamins, minerals and antioxidants that support immune health.
  - Try eating produce from each of the color groups every day: red, purple/blue, green, yellow orange, brown/white/tan and black.
- Good hygiene and hand-washing often help prevent the spread of germs. Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds using soap and water.
  - Use alcohol gel if soap and water is not available.
  - Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Clean glasses, forks, spoons and other utensils to reduce the spread and growth of bacteria.
  - Remember to wash produce before eating or using in recipes.
- Find healthy and appropriate ways to cope with stress, such as meditation, listening to music or writing.
- Physical activity also is a great way to help manage stress and may help reduce the risk of some chronic diseases that could weaken your immune system further.
- Lack of sleep contributes to a variety of health concerns, such as a weakened immune system.
  - Seven to nine hours is recommended each day for adults, and children need eight to 14 hours, depending on their age.

Adapted from: <https://www.eatright.org/health/wellness/preventing-illness/support-your-health-with-nutrition> and <https://www.eatright.org/health/wellness/preventing-illness/how-to-keep-your-immune-system-healthy> accessed on March 18, 2020.