

7 Foods That Boost Your Immune System

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As the holiday season quickly approaches, with flu season on its heels—you may feel that immune-system muggers are lurking everywhere you go. But the good news is that you can powerfully strengthen your natural defenses against disease, simply by eating the right foods.

Studies show that immunity starts in the gut, making what you put in your stomach a key part of protecting yourself against germs. Here's a look at seven delicious foods that will help you and your family ward off colds, flu and other winter bugs.

- - **Garlic.** This pungent herb has long been used as a medicine to prevent or treat a variety of illnesses, due to its antibacterial and antiviral properties. A 2012 study published in *Cochrane Summaries* reports that when 146 people were randomly assigned to take a garlic supplement or a placebo for 12 weeks, the garlic takers were nearly two-thirds less likely to catch a cold. And along with adding zest to meals, garlic may cut risk for colon cancer by up to 30 percent if it's consumed frequently, an earlier study found.
- - **Probiotics.** The “good” bacteria found in fermented foods and supplements help stave off colds, a review of 10 randomized studies found. People who took probiotics—a Greek word meaning “for life”—were up to 42 percent less likely come down with upper respiratory tract infections, the researchers found. The friendly bacteria also improve digestive health and may lower cholesterol.
- - **Tea.** This invigorating brew may help keep the doctor away, according to a Harvard study. People who drank five cups of black tea daily for two weeks had five times as much virus-fighting interferon in their blood as they did at the start of the study. Scientists credit a tea compound called L-theanine for its immunity-boosting effects.
- - **Mushrooms.** A tasty addition to salads and main courses, mushrooms need not be exotic or expensive to boost immunity. In fact, an Agriculture Research Service-sponsored study found that white button mushrooms (the kind commonly sold in grocery stores) revved up production of antiviral and other proteins cells release to protect and repair tissue.
- - **Coffee.** New studies have revealed some surprising health perks in a cup of joe. People who drink hot coffee (or tea) are 50 percent less likely to harbor MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) bacteria in their nose, cutting their risk for developing the dangerous superbug. MRSA causes about 278,000 hospitalizations a year, according to the CDC. Of course, you don't want to overdo it because excessive caffeine is not good for your brain.
- - **Citrus fruits.** Most people reach for vitamin C after they've already come down with a cold. But this powerful antioxidant, found in citrus fruits (and many other foods) can also help ward off illness by keep your immune system running at full throttle. Vitamin C aids in wound healing and is found at high concentrations in the body's disease-fighting white blood cells.

- - **Chicken soup.** This classic comfort food has been used as a home remedy for respiratory infections since the 12th century—and a 2012 study published in *American Journal of Therapeutics* credits a substance called carnosine for its medicinal value. Found in both chicken soup and chicken breast, carnosine helps the immune system fight colds and flu, but the benefits are temporary. Chicken soup may also reduce inflammation from a cold, the National Institutes of Health reports.