

Healthy Living to Support Immunity

It is cold and flu season, and most people will do anything possible to avoid getting sick. Cold and flu season peaks between December and February, and they are the main reason for doctor visits, and missing school or work during the winter months. Because of this, we get an overwhelming number of ads and articles that are pushing natural remedies for boosting immunity and fighting illness...but what can you believe? Read on to learn more about what science says can help you stay happy and healthy throughout the winter, and the rest of the year.

Cold and Flu Remedies

Who hasn't heard the phrase, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away", or eaten a bowl of hot chicken soup to help cure a cold? There is a long history of nutritional remedies to the common cold and flu, but is there any truth behind it?



Chicken Soup

Eating chicken soup to help a cold is probably one of the most common remedies. The hot broth of the soup does ease congestion. It also helps to hydrate the body, providing fluid and some electrolytes that the body needs. There is also some evidence that chicken soup can help to reduce inflammation, most likely due to the vegetables like carrots, celery, and onions, that are found in the soup. So, in short, chicken soup probably won't cure your illness, but it may help to relieve some of the symptoms and comfort you until your body is able to recover.

Vitamin C

One of the most common beliefs is that Vitamin C can help prevent colds. There are several products that market themselves as "immunity boosters" to help prevent the cold and flu. Unfortunately, taking Vitamin C whenever a cold start will not cure you, and taking Vitamin C regularly does not prevent colds. The benefit of Vitamin C is that it may slightly improve your symptoms, and decrease the length of a cold by 1-1 ½ days if taken regularly.

Rather than taking a supplement, you can easily get Vitamin C through natural food sources. Everyone knows that oranges are a great source of Vitamin C, but fruits such as strawberries, pineapple, kiwi, and grapefruit are other good sources. Vegetables such as Brussels sprouts, bell pepper, broccoli, cabbage, and snow peas, can provide your body with Vitamin C as well.

Zinc

There has also been a link between zinc and colds, with zinc sometimes being contained in cough drops or lozenges. Zinc can help to reduce the length of colds when taken within 24 hours of when symptoms start. Be aware that it can sometimes cause nausea and other gastrointestinal symptoms, and should only be taken for a short time. Also, make sure you stay away from intranasal zinc, as a possible side effect is the irreversible loss of the sense of smell.

Nutrition and Immunity

Most researchers and health care professionals recognize there is a connection between nutrition and immunity, but at this time, there is very little evidence that certain foods or nutrients can help to improve your immune function. In most cases, this just means that the subject needs to be studied further. Even so, there is agreement

that a healthy body creates a healthy immune system, and that every part of your body functions better when you are eating a balanced diet.

Scientists recognize that people who are malnourished are more vulnerable to infectious disease. Therefore, it is important to make sure your body is getting good nutrition, with a variety of vitamins and minerals daily. The best way to do this is by eating a balanced diet of whole grains, dairy products, lean protein, and fruits and vegetables in various colors. If you are unable to get enough vitamins and minerals through natural food sources, a multivitamin supplement can be helpful.

Exercise and Immunity

Exercise has a number of health benefits. Similar to following a healthy diet, exercise contributes to overall good health, and therefore helps to build a healthy immune system. Exercise also helps to promote good circulation, which allows cells to move more freely through the body, to do the work of the immune system more efficiently.

Getting exercise during the winter can sometimes be difficult, with cold and snowy weather. Even if you are not able



to join a gym or exercise classes, there are still ways to stay active on your own. There are a variety of exercise videos or DVDs that can be done in your own living room. Shoveling snow, or sled riding with your kids counts as exercise as well. Many people will walk around the mall when it is too cold to walk outside. Keep in mind though, that the walking should be continuous and you don't want to stop every few minutes to window shop.

How to Stay Healthy

Living a healthy lifestyle is the best way to avoid illness during the winter months. There are many steps you can

take in addition to diet and exercise that can also help to naturally keep your immune system strong.

One of the best things to do is to take steps to avoid infection from others. Washing your hands frequently or using hand sanitizer is one of the best ways



to avoid spreading germs. During the holidays, you also want to avoid sharing food with other people. When you eat out of a community chip bowl at a party, or eat out of your grandmother's candy dish, you can easily be picking up germs from other friends and family members.

If you don't take care of your mental health during the holidays, it can also strain your physical health. Many people feel more stress over the holidays with party planning, buying gifts, and making time to visit friends and family. This stress can affect your sleeping habits and increase blood pressure, which can make it more difficult for your body to fight off infection. Be sure to make time for yourself over the holidays and cold winter months. Activities such as yoga or meditation can help with relaxation, and even more strenuous exercise can sometimes help relieve stress. Treat yourself to a massage, or even go out to a movie if you need some quiet time apart from friends and family. Everyone has their own ways that they like to relax, but try to include it as part of your schedule to help maintain your mental and physical health throughout the season.

The Bottom Line

Unfortunately, there is still no magic cure for the cold or flu, but your best defense will be maintaining a healthy lifestyle during those cold winter months. Take the time needed for yourself and your family to prepare healthy, balanced meals, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep so that your body is strong enough to fight off those infections, not only during cold and flu season...but all year long.

Need a Dietitian?

Registered Dietitians are here to help you with your nutrition questions. To make an appointment call 412.692.4497 (Oakland location) or 412.623.2421 (Shadyside location).