

Immune Supporting Foods

Fortunately for most of us, our well-equipped immune systems are constantly warding off bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites keeping us well and able. However, our modern Western diet and lifestyles plus our exposure to environmental toxins and pollutants are making it increasingly harder work for our immune systems to do their job well.

Luckily, nature can give our immune system a helping hand. Many foods and herbs contain powerful natural compounds which help to support and stimulate the immune system and it's crucial we consume an array of these foods on a daily basis.

Foods rich in vitamin C

Vitamin C increases the production of infection-fighting white blood cells, antibodies and increases levels of interferon, the protein that coats cell surfaces, preventing the entry of viruses. Many fruits and vegetable are rich in vitamin C. However, a great deal is lost in the cooking process. Where possible, eat vitamin C-rich food raw or minimally cooked (e.g., stir-fry or lightly steamed).

The best sources of vitamin C are:

Blackcurrants	Kiwi fruit	Nectarines	Brussels
Guava	Clementine	Peaches	sprouts
Strawberry	Grapefruit	Mangoes	Broccoli
Lemon	Raspberry	Peppers	Curly kale
Orange	Lychees	Spring greens	Mangetout

Foods rich in zinc

This valuable mineral increases the production of white blood cells that fight infection and helps them fight more aggressively. It also increases a specific type of immune cell called killer cells that fight against cancer and helps white blood cells release more antibodies.

Rich sources of zinc include:

Oysters	Lean red meat	Pumpkin seeds	Low fat
Shellfish	(1 x week)	Sesame seeds	yoghurt
Poultry	Pine nuts	Green peas	
Game	Pecan nuts		

Foods rich in vitamin E

Vitamin E stimulates the production of natural killer cells, those that seek out and destroy germs and cancer cells. Vitamin E enhances the production of B-cells, the immune cells that produce antibodies to destroy bacteria.

Vitamin E rich foods include:

Sunflower	Hazelnuts	Avocado
Seeds	Brazil nuts	Turnip greens
Almonds	Pine nuts	Tomato paste

Cold-pressed vegetable oils are also an excellent source of vitamin E. Just make sure you don't heat them up as they oxidise and are harmful. Alternatively add them to salads or drizzle over vegetable just before serving

Foods rich in beta-carotene

Beta carotene increases the number of infection-fighting cells, natural killer cells, and helper T-cells, as well as being a powerful antioxidant that mops up excess free radicals that accelerate ageing. Beta-carotene is abundant in yellow, orange, green and red fruits and vegetables e.g.

Sweet	Kale	Corriander	Romaine
potatoes	Spinach	Fresh thyme	lettuce
Carrots	Turnip greens	Cantaloupe	Broccoli
Peppers	Winter squash	Watermelon	String beans
Mango	Spring greens		

Foods rich in selenium

These minerals increase natural killer cells and mobilise cancer-fighting cells. Best food sources of selenium are:

Tuna	Egg yolks	Sunflower
Red snapper	Cottage cheese	seeds
Shrimp	Chicken	Brazil nuts

There are also several foods with special immune-boosting properties.

Berries

Berries, especially dark-coloured ones are very rich in antioxidants called anthocyanidins which help support the immune system. Berries are also a great source of vitamin C and zinc. Eat them fresh when in season and use frozen berry mixes for convenience. If you're feeling adventurous why not try some acai or goji berries for an extra potent immune boost.

Black elderberries

Black elderberries can be found growing wild all over the UK during September and October. Compounds within the black elderberries stop cold and flu viruses from entering our cells. It's important to cook elderberries, but they can be delicious added to jellies, syrups, sauces and stewed fruit.

Broccoli sprouts

Broccoli sprouts are great for stopping both ageing and cell decay. They can even help reduce your risk of cancer. There are few things packed with as many immune-boosting antioxidants as broccoli sprouts. You can buy fresh broccoli sprout from health food shops or grow your own at home using a sprouter. Add to salads and sandwiches or simply a garnishing handful to the top of your meal.

Garlic

Garlic helps kill bacteria and viruses. It is also a powder antioxidant and immune stimulant that stimulates the multiplication of infection-fighting white cells, boosts natural killer cell activity and increases the efficiency of antibody production. The active part of garlic is only generated when the garlic is crushed and unfortunately doesn't last long. To get the best out of your garlic, either add it to fresh juices and drink immediately or crush fresh garlic onto meals or salad before serving.

Ginger

Ginger is a strong antioxidant and helps to kill bacteria, parasites and the cold virus. It is also anti-inflammatory, helps to reduce congestion in the sinuses and has been shown to inhibit the growth of certain kinds of cancer cells. Ginger is lovely added to fresh juices or Indian or oriental dishes.

Green tea

Green tea is jam-packed full of antioxidants which help keep the immune system in tip-top condition. It has also been shown to have anti-cancer properties. Try swapping your normal tea or coffee for green tea. There are many different varieties available to suit all palates.

Lemons

Lemons are an excellent source of vitamin C as they have a cleansing and alkalising effect on the body which helps to remove toxins and maintain health. Lemon peel contains a compound called limonene which helps to activate the immune system. Drink lemon juice in warm water, add lemon juice to foods such as yoghurt, curries and salads or simply pop a whole slice through the juicer the next time you're making a juice.

Liquorice

Liquorice helps to counteract the immune suppressive effects of stress. It also soothes the membrane of the gut — an important immune barrier. Liquorice can be nibbled as a snack or drunk as a tea (this is not the same as the confectionary liquorice).

Mushrooms

Mushrooms contain compounds called beta-glucans which help to stimulate and activate the immune system. The most potent immune-boosting mushrooms are shitake, maitake and oyster mushrooms.

Natural probiotic yoghurt

70% of our immune system is in the gut so it relies on a good balance of friendly bacteria to function properly. Natural unsweetened yoghurt or soya yoghurt can help to support a healthy immune system by keeping gut flora balanced.

Onions

Onions are a rich source of fructo-oligosaccharides which nourish friendly bacteria and suppress the growth of potentially harmful bacteria in the colon. Onions are a rich source of flavonoids, such as quercetin, which help to support the immune system.

Oregano

As an immune stimulant, oregano is king of herbs as proven by Polish researchers who tested 70 varieties of plants and found oregano to be the one with the most significant immune-boosting powers. It is a powerful antibiotic, antiviral and antifungal herb too. Fresh oregano is best, but the dried herb still has beneficial properties. It tastes great added to Italian dishes just before serving or sprinkled over salads.

Turmeric

Turmeric has a balancing effect on the immune system. It stimulates the production of cells that fight diseases and cancers, while inhibiting the production of pro-inflammatory compounds. To get the maximum benefit from turmeric, try adding it to eggs. Eggs contain lecithin, which help to protect the turmeric from being broken down and destroyed in the digestive system. It tastes great added to scrambled eggs or an omelette as well as in curries and other Indian dishes.