

Americans with 'phytonutrient gap' fall short in nutrients that may support immune health

October 28 2010

The majority of Americans report getting a cold or flu in the past year, and more than a third say they'll make lifestyle changes to prevent getting sick again this year. However, 40 percent of Americans don't plan to take what is arguably the easiest and tastiest step to help potentially prevent illness this cold and flu season – eat more fruits and vegetables daily. (1)

According to a newly released report, America's Phytonutrient Report: Immune Health by Color, American adults who fall short in meeting their recommended daily fruit and vegetable intakes, are also likely to fall short in vitamins A, C, and E, zinc and selenium, all nutrients research suggests may support a healthy immune system. America's Phytonutrient Reports are released by The Nutrilite Health Institute, a worldwide collaboration of experts who are dedicated to helping people achieve optimal health – through research, education, and practical, personalized solutions. Nutrilite is the world's leading brand of vitamin, mineral, and dietary supplements, based on 2008 sales.

"During cold and [flu season](#), it is especially important that Americans eat a variety of colorful plant-based foods which provide phytonutrients and important immune-boosting vitamins and minerals too," says Keith Randolph, Ph.D., Technology Strategist for Nutrilite. "Our previous research documented that, on average, eight out of 10 American adults have a phytonutrient gap. And now we find that those Americans with a phytonutrient gap are falling short when it comes to immune-boosting nutrients too."

Key Findings

Using NHANES and USDA data that show what Americans eat; America's Phytonutrient Report: Immune Health by Color found that intakes of vitamins A, C and E, zinc and selenium were consistently higher among people who meet their fruit and vegetable recommendations based on government guidelines. For these select vitamins and minerals, people who meet their fruit and vegetable recommendations compared to those who do not, consume:

- more than double (125%) the vitamin C;
- nearly two-thirds more (59%) vitamin A;
- 47% more vitamin E;
- 20% more zinc;
- and, 16% more selenium.

The new report also summarized previously documented food sources of these immunity nutrients. (2) Not surprisingly, fruits and vegetables were a main contributor for vitamins A and C as follows:

- Vitamin A: 38.6% of total intake from carrots
- Vitamin C: 23.8% of total intake from orange and grapefruit juices

And while plant-foods are not necessarily the largest source for the other immunity nutrients, they do contribute to total intake among American

adults as follows according to previous research: (2)

- Vitamin E: 7.0% of total intake provided by tomatoes
- Zinc: 2.5% of total intake provided by dried beans and lentils
- Selenium: 1-2% of total intake provided by nuts and seeds

Overall, these data support the need for more plant-based eating among Americans. And yet, data from the original America's Phytonutrient Report: Quantifying the Gap found that only 3-12% of American adults meet their fruit and vegetable intake recommendations.

Americans Attempt To Fight the Cold War

Nearly nine out of 10 Americans say they'll wash their hands more frequently during cold and [flu](#) season to prevent illness. (1) About two thirds of Americans say they'll also take other actions to avoid getting sick including getting enough sleep (66%), eating more fruits and vegetables (60%) and getting a flu shot (54%). Despite the fact that the majority of Americans say they'll step up preventative actions, most (76%) say they are no more concerned than last year that they will suffer from the cold or flu this year.

Economic Impact

By simply adding more fruits and vegetables into their daily diet to up phytonutrient intake, Americans may not only be better equipped to avoid the cold and flu this season, but they may save money too. In the US alone, the common cold is estimated to result in \$2 billion spent in over-the-counter medication, and can be blamed for approximately 23 million absentee days from work. (3) All together, a total economic

impact of \$40 billion annually that could potentially be reduced with changes in dietary habits. (4)

Building a Stronger Immune System

"Avoiding colds and the flu takes more than just washing your hands and getting enough sleep," says Amy Hendel, Nutrilite's Phytonutrient Coach. "Eating a colorful variety of fruits and vegetables daily, that contain the antioxidant vitamins along with other plant-based foods like beans and nuts for nutrients like zinc and selenium, may be just as important."

To help close the "phytonutrient gap" and support immune health, Hendel, a registered physician assistant and nutritionist, offers the following tips for people at any age:

- Power up your plate. A serving of sweet potatoes has nearly double the vitamin A as a serving of carrots.
- Go beyond your comfort zone. Some of the best immune-boosters are found in less familiar plant-based foods. Try combining lentils, shitake mushrooms and spinach in soup this winter for zinc and selenium.
- Exercise. Keep in mind that diet alone is only part of the equation. Incorporate exercise into your daily routine, and remember small bouts of exercise add up over the course of the week.
- Wash your hands. Given that most cold and flu viruses are spread by direct contact, it is especially important to wash your hands frequently during the fall and winter months when colds and flu

are most prominent.

- Drink plenty of fluids. Proper hydration is not only good for your overall health, but especially beneficial during cold and flu season. Many fruits and vegetables, such as watermelon and tomatoes, have a high water content which can help you reach daily fluid intake levels.
- Meet the Daily Phytonutrient Goal. A good goal for most individuals is to consume a combined total of 10 servings of fruits and vegetables daily. For those having trouble getting enough fruits and vegetables into their daily diet, plant-based supplements which offer phytonutrients and nutrients associated with immune function are an option.

To see whether they have a "phytonutrient gap," consumers can check out the Phytonutrient Spectrum and their Daily Phytonutrient Snapshot at www.nutrilit.com. The Phytonutrient Spectrum brings to life the colors, health benefits and fruits and vegetables associated with select phytonutrients, and the Daily Phytonutrient Snapshot helps consumers determine which fruits and vegetables they need to eat more of to help close their individual "phytonutrient gap."

More information:

- (1) Online survey of 262 adults ages 19 and older conducted by Zoomerang in August 2010.
- (2) Cotton P, Subar A, Friday J, Cook A. Dietary sources of nutrients among U.S. adults, 1994-1996. J Am Diet Assoc. 2004;104:921-930.
- (3) Turner RB. Epidemiology, pathogenesis, and treatment of the common cold. Ann Allergy Asthma Immunol. 1997;78:531-539.
- (4) Fendrick AM, Monto AS, Nightengale B, Sarnes M. The economic burden of non-influenza-related viral respiratory tract infection in the United States. Arch Intern Med. 2003;163:487-494.

Provided by Weber Shandwick Worldwide

Citation: Americans with 'phytonutrient gap' fall short in nutrients that may support immune health (2010, October 28) retrieved 4 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-10-americans-phytonutrient-gap-fall-short.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.