

# Boost your immune system with a healthy lifestyle

May 18 2012, by Shirley Perryman

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Your immune system is your defense against disease. Its many different parts need to work in balance and harmony to protect our bodies from harmful germs and viruses; in essence to attack and destroy any they find.

A healthy [immune system](#) uses many defenses including skin, mucous membranes, [white blood cells](#) and the [lymphatic system](#). You can help your immune system do the best possible job of keeping you healthy by [maintaining a healthy weight](#), controlling your [blood pressure](#), not smoking, being active and choosing healthy foods.

No doubt you've either seen a product on store shelves or on TV commercials claiming it "supports," "enhances" or "boosts" the immune system. While these claims are allowed by the Food and Drug Administration, the manufacturer is responsible for the accuracy and truthfulness of these claims.

What those commercials don't tell you is that any food or drink that contains at least one nutrient – and there are many-- linked to immune function could make such a claim.

Don't be misled by marketing ploys suggesting a food or dietary supplement will improve your immunity to disease. Instead eat the foods that power up your immune system to keep you healthy.

For the immune system to produce protective immune cells it needs

essential nutrients. To get those nutrients, follow two basic rules:

- Choose foods that are whole or minimally processed and naturally rich in nutrients such as fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds and legumes.
- Read labels of processed foods and choose those made with real food ingredients (instead of chemicals) and less sugar and salt. That said, also keep in mind that some level of food processing can be essential, such as pasteurizing milk, to keep our food supply safe.
- Research on immunity is ongoing, and current results suggest certain foods help protect the immune system. Adopt healthy lifestyle practices to give your immune system the maximum benefit to provide protection and seek out foods with:
  - Vitamin E comes from vegetable oils and products made from them, such as salad dressings and margarine, wheat germ oil, nuts and seeds.
  - Vitamin C is often promoted to fight or reduce the symptoms associated with colds. Citrus fruits, strawberries, kiwi, red peppers, broccoli and tomatoes are good vitamin C sources readily available year round.
  - Probiotics, found in yogurt, are live microorganisms that, when consumed in adequate amounts, help your gut maintain the proper balance of organisms. Look for those with active bacteria cultures. Another option is to make your own yogurt cheese by draining the liquid whey off of plain yogurt. Scoop plain yogurt into cheesecloth and allow the whey to drain out overnight in the refrigerator. Yogurt cheese is thick and creamy and not quite as tart as yogurt. Yogurt cheese can be eaten as is or used as a more nutritious option than sour cream or cream cheese.

- Beta-glucans, are sugars found in mushrooms. They are a soluble polysaccharide that can improve the immune response. Found in all mushrooms, early research suggests that beta glucans activate certain white blood cells to fight off foreign invaders
- Soluble fiber abundant in citrus fruits, apples, oats, barley and legumes may help fight inflammation. Insoluble fiber is also important for good health, but it doesn't appear to be effective for immunity.
- Catechins in green tea have been shown to improve the immune response. Though green tea contains virus-fighting interferon, black tea has also been shown to have some benefit to the immune response.

**More information:** *The above column is written by Shirley Perryman, an Extension specialist in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition. The department is part of the College of Applied Human Sciences at Colorado State University.*

Provided by Colorado State University

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