

Nutrition to Boost the Immune System

Q&A with Our Registered Dietitians

We asked our Registered Dietitians Alison Liggett (GHBC) and Saba Barkneh (GHA) to share their recommendations for using nutrition to boost your immune system.

Q. What foods and drinks can we consume to strengthen our immune systems?

A. Our immune system is complex. It is influenced by an ideal balance of many factors, not just diet, and especially not by any one specific food or nutrient. It is important to note: there are no dietary modifications that can protect you against COVID-19. A balanced diet combined with other healthy lifestyle factors such as adequate sleep, exercise and low stress most effectively primes the body to fight infection and disease. A well-balanced diet is one full of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, beans, healthy fats, protein and probiotics.



Inflammation is part of the body's natural healing response, but stress and an unhealthy diet can kick this response into overdrive and damage our body instead of healing it. To help keep our immune systems working in our best interests, we should strive to keep inflammation in check. As far as diets go, antioxidants are responsible for decreasing inflammation by removing free radicals in the body. Plant-based foods are generally highest in antioxidants. Berries, dark chocolate, kale, red cabbage, beans, beets and spinach are all known to be high in antioxidants. Foods high in omega-3 fatty acids also have anti-inflammatory properties. Great sources include chia seeds, ground flax seeds, salmon, trout and walnuts.

Q. Do you recommend any supplements to boost the immune system? If so, which ones?

A. The best way to get the necessary nutrients is through natural sources. Consuming a well-balanced diet provides adequate vitamins and minerals to support good health. In general, supplements are beneficial for people who might have a deficiency or who are not getting enough of a specific vitamin or mineral in their diet. Talk with your doctor before taking any supplement.

Probiotics are the “good bacteria” found in your gut, and they have become a popular over-the-counter supplement. Probiotics help keep your gut healthy, which is key for building a strong immune system. You don't need to resort to supplements to get them. Fermented foods such as yogurt, sauerkraut and kimchi contain probiotics. Instead of spending money on an expensive probiotic supplement, enjoy a cup of plain yogurt or a side of kimchi! Your gut processes probiotics that occur naturally in food much better than those found in a

supplement. As with other supplements, you should consult with your doctor before you begin a probiotic regimen.

Q. What other nutritional tips do you have for boosting our immune systems?

A. There are several things you can do to boost your immune system.

- Consume a balanced diet with adequate amounts of protein, grains, fruits and vegetables on a daily basis. Eat balanced meals that include 1 protein, 1 vegetable or fruit, and 1 whole grain or starchy vegetable.
- Stay hydrated throughout the day by drinking one glass of water with meals, and at least one glass between each meal. You can aim to consume around 64 ounces of water per day, or ask your doctor to recommend a goal for you. Infuse your water with lemon, oranges or berries to get an extra boost of vitamins and add flavor if that helps you to drink more water instead of other beverages.
- Reduce your intake of sugar-sweetened beverages.
- Limit alcohol intake. Alcohol can decrease the body's ability to fight off an infection by reducing the number cells that are in your immune system. The recommended limit is up to one alcoholic beverage per day for women and two beverages per day for men.
- Maintain a healthy weight. In addition to following a good diet, get exercise and ensure you get good sleep, too. These practices will help you manage your weight.

Q. How does Dining Services help residents to eat better and boost their immune systems?

A. The Dining Services menus provide balanced and varied meal options that support good health. We also accommodate special dietary requests as needed. We design our menus to serve fresh, seasonal and local produce, which ensures better quality and richer flavor and helps to maximize nutritional value.

We try to offer a variety of food items to please as many palates as possible. Some people prefer to eat their vegetables plain, while others prefer to have them mixed in soups or stews. For those who love dark leafy greens, we have kale salads, sautéed collard greens, spinach and Swiss chard. Plain vegetable lovers enjoy carrots, green beans and broccoli offered as standalone sides throughout the week. To assist residents in increasing their vegetable intake, we also incorporate vegetables into our soups and entrees.

To ensure that our residents have enough Omega-3 fatty acids, we offer salmon each night for dinner. We also feature trout and other fatty fish at least once a week. Nuts and seeds are added to our side dishes and daily salads. One side dish that comes to mind is our bulgur and pecans, which incorporates both whole grains and nuts! Whole grains are known to be high in a dietary fiber and minerals. We also offer whole grains such as farro, quinoa, brown rice and barley throughout the week.

We also encourage fruit as part of a balanced diet. Fruit is offered as a dessert option for lunch and dinner. Fresh fruit such as pineapple, melons and grapes are offered three times per week, and bananas, apples and oranges are always available.