



# Eat Yourself to Health

## Nutritional Medicine

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## Cold and Flu Prevention

### How to avoid colds and flu

As winter approaches, the incidence of colds and flu sharply rises and it is important to consider ways to reduce the likelihood of being infected and falling ill. People especially at risk from complications from the flu include those aged 65 or over, pregnant women and those with chronic health conditions. Flu is not the same as the common cold. Although both are unpleasant, the symptoms of flu are much more severe than that of a cold and can lead to pneumonia or even be life-threatening in a small minority of cases.

### Hygiene measures

Colds and flu are caused by viruses which enter our bodies through the nose and eyes. They're caught from breathing in airborne droplets or touching droplets living on surfaces after someone has sneezed or coughed. Therefore, the best way to avoid contact with them is to wash your hands regularly, especially after touching surfaces, avoid putting your hands in your eyes or nose and not sharing contaminated items.

### Prevention is better than cure

Because flu is brought on by a virus and not bacteria, antibiotics won't treat it (unless you get a secondary bacterial infection.) People who are at risk of flu complications are advised by their doctor to get an annual flu jab, which can lessen the likelihood of contracting it and may reduce the severity if they do. However, despite continual advances in medicine, scientists have failed to find the cure for the common cold or flu, because it is the host – in other words you and your defences, not the invader which is the key. Needless to say, the best way to minimize your chances of succumbing to a cold or flu and recovering rapidly is to keep your immune system healthy.

### The importance of a healthy diet

An inadequate diet compromises the immune system by depleting the body of essential nutrients that play an important role in regulating this intricate system. For instance, eating too much sugar is detrimental to the immune system. Research reveals that it can significantly reduce the number of white blood cells needed to engulf and destroy micro-organisms. Sugar also depletes Vitamin C.

Instead of eating sugary food devoid of nutritional value select colourful fruit and vegetables which will be teaming with antioxidants, phytonutrients and vitamins. Vitamin C is in fact the most researched nutrient for boosting immunity. It is a powerful antioxidant and natural anti-viral which also maintains the health of our mucous membranes. Rich sources include berries, citrus fruits (especially lemons), peppers, broccoli, peas, watercress and cabbage. Most animals produce their own vitamin C but humans have lost this ability during our evolution and have since become prone to infections.

Zinc is a key mineral for the immune system and is a frequent micronutrient deficiency. It has antiviral activity against several viruses that cause the common cold and has been shown to speed recovery. Zinc can be found in lean meats (vegetarians are more prone to being deficient), seeds, wholegrains and legumes.

Another healthy addition to the diet (or in supplement form) is garlic as it contains sulphur compounds which have antimicrobial activity. Essential fats found in nuts, seeds and oily fish should also be incorporated into the diet, especially Omega 3 fatty acids found in fish oils because they have anti-inflammatory and immune

enhancing actions. On the other hand, highly refined fats such as corn oils, margarine and oils found in processed foods suppress the immune system, so should be avoided.

## Healthy lifestyle

Studies have shown that regular exercise can improve immune system defence and as little as thirty minutes walking five times a week can have significant effects- increasing white blood cells and antibody response. Getting sufficient sleep and finding time for rest and relaxation will also keep your immune system strong. Sleep improves resistance to infection, so it is important to get a regular seven- eight hours, as when we sleep, our immune system is replenished. Lack of sleep also depletes nutrients especially magnesium and vitamin C. Getting sufficient sunshine is also important as Vitamin D is also integral to a balanced immune response.

Whilst short-term acute stress can actually boost the immune system (as the fight or flight response causes the immune system to prepare itself for infections), chronic longer-term stress has a negative impact because excess adrenaline and cortisone will lower immune system function. If you are under stress, consider relaxation techniques such as yoga, deep breathing and meditation. Finally, if you do happen to contract a cold or flu, rest, eat lots of vegetable soups, berries and citrus fruit. Add slices of ginger, cinnamon sticks and lemon to hot water for a soothing drink as hot fluids loosen mucous.

## Food Supplements

Kirsten will prescribe appropriate supplements for each individual to counter any deficiencies which can compromise immunity, and also prescribe ones to support the immune system directly where needed. Support for the nervous system is also key if stress is a factor. And lastly gut support and ensuring a healthy microbiome is integral as so much of our immune system is housed in our digestive system and our gut bacteria have such an important role in modulating our immune response.



**Kirsten Brooks** BSc Hon DN Med – is a Nutritionist with a degree in Nutritional medicine. She has a practice in South London (Eat Yourself to Health) and has written articles for newspapers and various health publications. Kirsten is a member of the professional body – CThA.  
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