

Supporting your immune system

The best thing you can do to strengthen your immune system is to make healthy lifestyle choices.

Getting enough sleep, keeping physically active and having a nutrient rich diet can all help during cold and flu season. When it comes to diet, there is no strong evidence that links one particular food to cold and flu prevention. However, there are a number of foods that are important for supporting a healthy immune system.

Brightly coloured foods can help fight off the flu

Eating a wide variety of fruits and vegetables that are brightly coloured can ensure you are getting the ideal amounts of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants to support a healthy immune system. Aim for 2 serves of fruit and 5 serves of vegetables each day.



Tips for increasing your vegetable intake

- Add finely chopped carrots, celery and capsicum to sauces and casseroles when browning onions and garlic. Stir through baby spinach and mushrooms toward the end of the cooking time. Cooking a larger batch and freezing individual portions for lunches and quick dinners will save you time.
- Vegetable based soups can make a quick and tasty meal. Make a large pot on the weekend to use over the next few days for lunches and dinner. Add lentils for extra protein and fibre and choose reduced salt stocks to keep the salt content to a minimum.
- Keep frozen vegetables in your freezer for a convenient way to add vegetables to your meal without much preparation. Frozen vegetables are just as nutritious as fresh vegetables and do not contain added sodium which canned vegetables often do.

Tips for increasing your fruit intake

- Add fruit to your breakfast - try chopped pear and dates in porridge or cereal. Make a breakfast smoothie by blending a banana, berries, wheat biscuits and milk.
- Keep a bag of frozen berries in your freezer for inspiration – add to yoghurt and baked goods for an antioxidant boost.
- Fruit makes a fantastic morning or afternoon tea snack at work. At the start of the week take a few pieces along and store them in the fridge for the week.



Specific nutrients to support your immunity

Zinc

Zinc is crucial for the normal development and functioning of the cells and antibodies in our body that are our immune system.

Meat, fish and poultry are the major contributors of zinc to the diet but wholegrain cereals, fortified cereals, nuts and dairy foods also contribute substantial amounts.

It is best to get zinc from food sources as supplements can interfere with the absorption of other nutrients such as iron and copper. In general, zinc absorption from a diet high in animal protein will be greater than from vegetarian and vegan diets. If you follow a vegetarian/vegan diet check with your doctor or Accredited Practising Dietitian as to whether you are getting adequate zinc through your diet.



Vitamin C

Vitamin C is important for maintaining a strong immune system. If you are having 2 serves of fruit and 5 serves of vegetables each day then you will be getting an adequate amount of vitamin C in your diet.

Vitamin C is a water-soluble vitamin which means it can't be stored by the body. This means you need to replace it daily by consuming vitamin C rich fruits and vegetables.

Keep your fluid intake up

Dehydration can cause lethargy, worsen cold and flu symptoms and slow down your digestion. The recommended amount of fluid you need to drink is approximately 2 litres per day and its best this comes mainly from water.

If you find that you are drinking much less water in winter, try these tips to increase your fluid intake:

- Make a habit of always starting the day with a glass of water when you wake up. Your body dehydrates overnight and needs fluid for rehydration.
- Try warm water with a slice of lemon throughout the day for a warming way to increase your fluid intake.
- Try herbal teas such as peppermint, jasmine or lemon and ginger teas which are all caffeine free.



Are you getting enough sleep?

Studies have shown that a lack of sleep can reduce your immunity. The optimum amount for adults is between 7 – 8 hours a night.

During sleep, your immune system releases protective proteins which can fight infection or inflammation. When you are sleep deprived there is a decrease in the production of these protective proteins leaving you more vulnerable to viruses and colds.

If you have trouble getting to sleep or are experiencing poor quality sleep consider whether these changes may help you:

- Ensure your bedroom is as dark as possible.
- Avoid heavy meals late at night.
- Minimise screen and phone time up to 1 hour before bedtime.

Hand washing

Frequent hand washing is important to protect against colds and other bacteria that cause illness. These bacteria and viruses can be present on the surfaces that we touch.

Always wash hands before eating and preparing food and after using the bathroom.

