

How To Strengthen Your Immune System

By Cindy Johnson

With flu and cold season fast approaching, it's a good idea to take a hard look at your daily habits and how well you are taking care of your body. Keeping in mind that "you are what you eat," it's smart to begin strengthening your body's defenses by eating healthier. If you don't eat enough fruits and vegetables, you may also need vitamin supplements.

Antioxidants protect your body from damage and help enhance your immune system. Vitamin C is one of the most important vitamins to consume because our body cannot manufacture it on its own. Good sources of Vitamin C include fruits such as lemons, oranges and kiwi as well as vegetables such as greens and sprouts.

Vitamin E is found in food sources like whole grains, nuts and seeds. It is a powerful antioxidant that has also been shown to be effective in preventing heart disease.

Beta Carotene is an antioxidant found in vegetables including carrots, beets, yams and squash. The carotenoid molecules found in these vegetables help to strengthen eyes and skin and protect against cancer.

Selenium is a mineral with excellent antioxidant action. Good food sources of selenium include bran, wheat germ, broccoli, onions, tomatoes and kale.

Zinc is growing increasingly popular as a defense against colds and flu. It improves T-cell function and is a powerful booster for your immune system. It is important for maintaining proper vision, prostate health and aids in healing wounds.

Magnesium is needed for numerous enzyme functions within the body and helps the heart to work more efficiently. A deficiency of magnesium can often be traced to over consumption of caffeinated drinks and acidic foods.

A diet that is rich in whole grains, fruits, nuts and vegetables is a potent weapon in strengthening your immune system. On the other hand, a high sugar and high fat diet puts strain on the body leading to a higher risk of illness and shortened life expectancy. That does not mean you should eliminate protein and carbohydrates entirely. Fish, chicken, beans, grains, soy and eggs are good sources of protein that can be combined with vegetables and fruits as part of a healthy diet.

Carbohydrates help give the body energy, but you should remember there is a big difference between refined and complex carbohydrates. Excess consumption of refined carbohydrates like table sugar can suppress the immune system. Substituting honey and fruit sweeteners for white sugar can help boost your immunity and improve your overall level of health.

Fiber is another important disease fighter. High fiber diets decrease the risk of heart disease and cancer and also aid in weight loss. Low fiber consumption can lead to constipation, irritable bowel disease and interfere with proper insulin levels.

Consumption of Omega-3 and Omega-6 fats lowers the risk of heart disease and decreases levels of cholesterol and triglycerides. People who eat cold water fish regularly have lower rates of heart disease and they are more disease-resistant in general. Flaxseed oil is a good source of Omega-3. Whenever possible avoid highly processed saturated fats like coconut oil, palm oil and margarine. They have been linked to hardening of the arteries.

Regular moderate exercise also enhances the immune system. Exercise helps more oxygen flow to your vital organs and increases your body's ability to fight infection. Any aerobic exercise such as jogging, walking, hiking, swimming, playing tennis or walking on a treadmill can help improve your resistance to disease.

Botanical and herbal supplements have been used for hundreds of years to ward off ailments, and today they are more popular than ever. Echinacea is one of the most consumed and most controversial herbs in the world. Many swear by its ability to prevent colds and flu or lessen their severity if taken at the onset. Others in the medical community say it can be dangerous or has no effect.

Garlic stimulates the immune system and helps lower blood pressure and cholesterol. Other immune-stimulating herbs include astragalus, milk thistle, goldenseal, and ginseng. Before embarking on a regimen of herbs or any over-the-counter supplements it is wise to check with your doctor, or consult with a nutritionist or herbalist to make sure the herbs and vitamins you want to take will not interfere with any medications you may already be taking.

And last but not least, one of the easiest ways to boost your immune system is to change the way you think. Stress is one of the greatest causes of a weakened immune system and also accelerates aging. Anything you can do to reduce your stress level can improve your resistance to disease and contribute to a longer life.