



Immune Boosting Foods to Keep You Healthy This Winter

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In the blink of an eye, summer is gone, fall is slipping by and winter is quickly approaching. Though hopes of snow flurries enter our minds, we often think of winter as a season of germs. Your annual flu shot and regular hand washing are a great start to preventing colds and flu (See [“One Shout and We’re Out”](#)). In addition, there are several nutritional strategies you can practice to stay healthy this winter.

Many foods and herbs contain immune boosting properties that can give you extra health protection. Include these foods in your daily eating plan to get an advantage against the germs of the season.

- **Vitamin C foods** - Citrus, strawberries, bell peppers, leafy greens, tomatoes.
 - o The Vitamin C in these foods helps keep mucous membranes healthy. Vitamin C is also an antioxidant.
- **Fruits and Vegetables high in antioxidants** - Berries, apples, sweet potatoes, broccoli, asparagus, beets, carrots, spinach, onions, winter squashes, citrus.
- **Vitamin D foods** - Wild Alaskan salmon, sardines and foods fortified with Vitamin D (milk, orange juice, tofu, alternative milk beverages, some cereals)
 - o One of the many roles of Vitamin D is fortifying the immune system. Unfortunately, the list of foods high in Vitamin D is a short list because Vitamin D is not abundant in the food supply.
 - o Our biggest source of Vitamin D is sunlight. Since we don't get as much sun exposure in the winter months, our blood levels of Vitamin D may drop which can impact our body's ability to fight germs and infections. Include Vitamin D foods in your daily eating plan and know your blood Vitamin D level. If it is low (≤ 30 ng/mL), ask your health care provider about a quality Vitamin D3 supplement and the dosage that is right for you.
- **Omega-3 fatty acid foods** - Wild Alaskan salmon, sardines and other low mercury, cold-water fish, walnuts, flax and chia seeds, expeller cold pressed canola oil.

- **Probiotic foods** - Lactobacillus yogurt, kefir, Kim chi, sauerkraut, Kombucha.
 - Did you know that 70% of your immune system cells and antibodies reside in your GI tract? Your GI tract contains trillions of bacteria (both good bacteria and bad) that play a role in your body's ability to fight viruses, bacteria and infections. Probiotics are good gut bacteria that are known to line the GI tract making it hard for "bad bugs and bacteria" to take up residence in your body. The cultured and fermented foods listed above are natural sources of probiotics. Eating these foods regularly helps insure you are promoting a healthy balance of gut bacteria.
 - If you have a dairy allergy or lactose intolerance, talk to your health care provider or nutritionist about whether a probiotic supplement would be appropriate for you.
 - (BTW, bad bacteria thrive on sugar and good bacteria thrive on fiber, so a 2nd tip here is minimize your sugar intake and eat whole, unprocessed carbohydrate foods to keep the good and bad gut bacteria in a healthy balance.)
- **Lean protein foods, especially those that contain iron and zinc** - Skinless chicken and turkey, fish, beef, bison, low fat dairy, eggs, beans and whole soy foods.
- **Immune boosting herbs** - Elderberry
 - Elderberry has been shown in several research studies to boost the immune system. Some research has shown it to be effective at warding off the flu virus when combined with Vitamin C.
 - To find out more about the uses of elderberry for colds or flu, check out this link at WebMD.com.

A word of caution: most parts of the elderberry plant are poisonous except for the dried flowers and cooked or dried berries. **Do not eat raw elderberries, raw flowers, stems, leaves, branches or roots of the elderberry plant.**

Since elderberry can boost the immune system, certain people should avoid consuming it. Do not take elderberry if:

- **You are on immune suppressive drugs**
- **You have an autoimmune condition like M.S., Lupus or Rheumatoid Arthritis**
- **You are pregnant or breastfeeding**

Check with your health care provider if you have any concerns about elderberry.

Note: You can find dried elderberries at:

- [Chatham Marketplace](#) in Pittsboro, NC
- [The Little Herb House](#) in Raleigh, NC
- [Amazon](#)

References:

- 1) Mullin, G. and Swift, K, **The Inside Tract**, Rodale Inc., 2011.
- 2) Consumer Lab, 2013.
- 3) Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, **Nutrition Care Manual**, 2013.
- 4) Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, SCAN DPG Nutrition Facts Sheet, “Foods to Promote Immune Function”, January 2011.
- 5) WebMD, “Vitamins and Supplements Lifestyle Guide”, 2011.