

Eating Habits for a Healthy Immune System

You need a healthy immune system to fight off viruses that cause colds and flu. Your immune system defends your body against illness and keeps viruses out. If a virus does get in, your immune system seeks it out to destroy it.

A healthy diet is important to keep your immune system working at its best. However there is no single food, diet, supplement or herbal product that will give your immune system a 'boost' or that will prevent or treat the flu, including COVID-19.

Flu vaccines are the best way to prevent the flu, although at this time there is no vaccine to prevent COVID-19. If you do get the flu, your symptoms may be milder if you have been vaccinated.

This fact sheet describes some steps that you can take to keep your immune system strong and healthy.



Steps you can take

Choose a healthy lifestyle that includes the following habits:

- i Eat a nutrient-rich diet daily:
 - i Eat a variety of colourful vegetables and fruits that provide a variety of antioxidants such as vitamin C, selenium and carotenoids.
 - i Include whole grain choices like whole grain bread, pasta and brown rice, whole oats, barley and quinoa that provide lots of fibre and nutrients like iron, niacin and folic acid.
 - i Select a variety of protein foods like legumes (e.g. cooked dried beans, peas and lentils), nuts and seeds, eggs, lower fat dairy products, fish, chicken and meat that provide nutrients in addition to protein like iron and zinc along with calcium, vitamin D and B vitamins from dairy products.

- | Be physically active and follow [Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines](#). It can help the immune system stay strong and ready to fight certain illnesses if they occur.
- | Get adequate sleep. Aim for 7 to 8 hours each night.
- | Reduce stress. If you have a lot of stress, it can weaken your immune system, which may make you more likely to catch a cold or the flu.
- | Wash your hands for 20 seconds before preparing, eating or drinking food and beverages, or use a hand sanitizer. Avoid touching your eyes or nose with unwashed hands.
- | If you drink alcohol follow [Canada's Low Risk Drinking Guidelines](#).
- | Get help to quit smoking if you smoke.

Other Considerations

Probiotics are good bacteria that may help keep your immune system healthy. Probiotics may decrease the number of colds you catch and shorten the length of your cold. More research is needed to determine the type and amount of probiotic that may help.

There are supplements such as vitamin C, zinc and North American ginseng that may help you have fewer colds, reduce your cold symptoms or help your cold go away more quickly.

If you want to try probiotics or supplements to help fight colds, talk to a registered dietitian or pharmacist to know what is right for you. If you do take supplements, make sure they have a Natural Product Number (NPN) from Health Canada.



Additional Resources

Health Canada:

- | Cold or Flu <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/cold-flu-know-difference-fact-sheet.html>

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- | Steps to Healthy Eating <https://www.pennutrition.com/KnowledgePathway.aspx?kpid=3127&trid=27126&trcatid=467>
 - | Canada's Food Guide <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>
 - | Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/tips-for-healthy-eating/physical-activity/>

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