

We know that exercise is good for a healthy immune system, but what about nutrition? Let's dispel a few myths and provide a list of healthy foods that support your immune system.

Note I said foods that "support" your immune system. Despite what you might hear from others on social media, you cannot "boost" your immune system. It is after all, a system comprised of many parts to keep you well. From your skin (the largest immune system organ in the body), to the mucous membranes in the nose and mouth, to the stomach acid produced in your gut, to antibodies and white blood cells, they all work as a system to help repel bacteria and viruses.

The best approach to keeping the system working hard for you is a whole foods diet filled with nutrient-rich foods. Supplements cannot substitute for eating well.

There are specific nutrients that the immune system really likes, but getting these nutrients from food is better than supplements. Foods provide a mix of nutrients that work in concert to support immunity.

Some of the key nutrients include:

- **Vitamin C.** Why? It acts as an antioxidant, protecting tissues from the oxidative damage (that is the oxygen-consuming process that happens in exercise).
 - Vitamin C-rich foods include oranges, grapefruit, mandarins, peppers of all types, kiwi, strawberries, broccoli, tomatoes, cantaloupe, cabbage, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts. Don't forget that orange and tomato juice are also good sources.
- **Zinc.** Why? It is part of more than 200 enzyme systems involved in many aspects of the immune system. Some studies show that up to 90% of endurance athletes do not meet the recommendation for zinc.
 - Zinc-rich foods include oysters, crab, lobster, fish, beef, pork, dark-meat chicken and turkey, baked beans, and whole grains.
- **Iron.** Why? Iron is needed for immune cells to grow and multiply, especially white blood cells. Many female athletes have low iron intake and a high rate of iron depletion or deficiency, resulting in anemia.
 - Iron-rich foods include clams, beef, dark-meat chicken and turkey, iron-fortified grains and cereals, and dried beans and

peas. Consuming Vitamin C-rich foods with plant sources of iron increases absorption of this important nutrient.

Remember, more isn't better! Nutrients work together to keep us healthy. Overloading on one nutrient can lead to imbalances of others. And, excessive intake of zinc (especially from supplements) can lead to nausea and vomiting.

In addition to nutrients, probiotics found in yogurt and kefir, support a healthy gut, and colorful fruits and veggies are loaded with plant compounds that act as antioxidants, too.

Put all these nutrients together with these tasty meals ideas:

- Whole grain, iron-fortified breakfast cereal with glass of orange juice or slice of cantaloupe.
- Bean burrito in whole grain tortilla topped with tomato salsa and dark leafy greens.
- Baked chicken thighs with mango-salsa topped baked potatoes and steamed broccoli.
- Fish tacos with coleslaw.
- Lobster mac and cheese and mixed fruit salad.
- Grilled pork loin with roasted cauliflower and brown rice.
- Clam chowder, crusty enriched bread with a spinach salad with sliced strawberries.

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