

Busting the two biggest myths about your immune system

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Winter is here, and that gets us thinking about our immune system, and what we need to do to boost it, so that it helps us avoid colds and flu, or at least recover from them more quickly.



The immune system is one of the most complex networks in the body that is still far from being completely understood by the world's scientific community. As pieces of research are added to the picture, myths about the immune system arise in the gaps, and they are often acted upon as truths.

Registered Dietitian and spokesperson for ADSA (Association for Dietetics in South Africa), Linda Drummond helps us sort fact from the fiction:

MYTH # 1 - 'All I need for a winter immune boost is a multi-vitamin or more Vitamin C'
– “This is probably the most common misconception - that nutritional supplements, or greater doses of one particular vitamin, can be an effective protective solution,” says Linda. “While Vitamin C does play an important immune-boosting role, research has shown that supplementing with Vitamin C does not actually help you to avoid developing colds and flu. Studies have found that in some, but not all cases, Vitamin C, as an isolated strategy, may help to reduce the duration of the illness, but not protect you from it. Nutritional supplements can play an important role in supporting improved health for vulnerable people, such as children, the elderly, pregnant women and those with health conditions that compromise their immunity. However, others should rather aim to get their daily intake of immune-boosting micronutrients from their food. Eating a variety of healthy foods every day, including lots of vegetables and fruits, wholegrains, dairy, meat, chicken or fish, beans and lentils, and plant fats provides not just Vitamin C, but also the other immune-boosting nutrients such as Vitamins A, D and the B's, as well as trace elements such as zinc and selenium. You cannot expect that if you eat poorly, but take a supplement, your immune system will still be highly effective. What you eat, not what you supplement with, is what is most important to build your defences against winter germs. Supplements are not the antidote to unhealthy eating. They can help to fill in gaps in an otherwise healthy eating plan, and you should get your dietitian's advice

on this. However, we should all be clear that when it comes to what we consume and our immune systems and our health, there is simply no substitute that we know of at this time that beats the effectiveness of eating a variety of quality, minimally processed foods, which are mostly plant-based, every day. It is the way to go.”

MYTH # 2 ‘To improve my immunity in winter all I have to do is focus on the food I eat and the supplements I consume.’ “This is false,” says Linda. “While healthy eating is a vital immune boosting strategy, and nutritional supplementation may be necessary for you if you have a compromised immune system, it remains one critical aspect of having an effective immune system during the challenging winter months. But, it is a complex system and other factors are at play.

Scientific research has shown that:

- *Sufficient sleep* is also important to support the immune system;
- *Regular exercise* is a powerful immune system booster;
- *And, a positive mental and emotional state* strengthens your resistance to disease.

What this means is that during winter, if we want to effectively develop our resistance to illnesses, we need to keep our focus on our whole body and our entire lifestyle, not only one part of it. We must get enough quality rest that is balanced by also getting daily physical exercise. We need to take regular action to manage stress, develop mindfulness and be in charge of our disruptive emotions. Sleepless nights; days of inaction and stress that is off the charts for most of the time will batter our immune system as surely as nutrient poor food and other poor eating habits.”

The bottom-line is that you should boost your immune system this winter, and, based on real evidence, you can do that each day by:

- Eating healthily by focusing on a variety of minimally processed quality foods from the different food groups to ensure your body gets all the nutrients it needs. Aim for at least five colourful vegetables and fruit daily;
- Saying no to high energy, sugar, salt and fat foods including take-aways, sweetened drinks, sweets, chips, cakes, biscuits and all the other highly-processed options;
- Enjoying tucking up warm at night and getting the sleep you need to wake up refreshed and strong;
- Keeping active every day and
- Letting go of your stress and anxieties.
- Washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 15 seconds. When you are not near a sink, use a hand sanitizer.

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