

Simple Ways to Boost Immunity for the Holidays

By Lynn C. Allison

As the winter holidays draw near, many people find themselves catching colds or battling the flu — and it's not just bad luck. The season brings together a perfect storm of factors that make it easier to get sick.

Shorter days and colder temperatures drive us indoors, where close contact increases the spread of viruses. Meanwhile, indoor heating creates dry air that dehydrates nasal passages, weakening one of the body's first lines of defense against infection.

Add in holiday stress, travel, disrupted routines, and late nights, and your immune system can easily take a hit.

"As the seasons change and holidays approach, we often gather with friends and family, so we should do our best to protect ourselves and our loved ones," says Michael Greger, M.D., founder of NutritionFacts.org. "The healthier we are, the better our immune system may be able to battle viral infection."

Top Tips to Strengthen Your Immune System

Eat a plant-based diet. Greger notes that plant-based foods are powerful immune boosters — on average, they contain 64 times more antioxidants than animal-based foods. Load up on vitamin C-rich produce such as citrus fruits, strawberries, red bell peppers, and kiwis.

"Vitamin C stimulates the

production of white blood cells, which are important for fighting infections," he says.

Practice gratitude. According to Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., an expert in autoimmune disease, cultivating gratitude can actually lower inflammation and improve immune response.

It also reduces anxiety and depression, both of which can suppress immunity. "Writing down three things you're grateful for each morning is a good way to practice," he advises.

Start your day with sunlight.

Limited winter daylight can throw off your circadian rhythm and disrupt thyroid function, making your immune system sluggish. Getting at least 30 minutes of morning sunlight within an hour of waking helps keep both your immune system and thyroid hormones in sync.

Keep vitamin D levels in the 'sweet spot.'

Alan Christianson, a naturopathic medical doctor, recommends maintaining a vitamin D level between 35 mg/mL and 55 mg/mL for optimal immune protection. Levels below 30 ng/mL can weaken your defenses, while higher levels may pose risks.

"Get your blood levels tested at least annually," he says.

Add garlic to your meals. Garlic has been prized for centuries as a natural disease-fighter. Studies

showed that adults who took aged garlic extract (AGE) experienced increased activity in two different types of immune cells after only 45 days.

In addition, the group taking AGE reported 61 percent fewer days of feeling sick when they caught the cold or flu.

Get enough sleep. Between visitors, travel, and late-night festivities, sleep often takes a back seat during the holidays — but it's critical for immunity. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine advises adults to get at least seven hours per night. Research shows that sleeping fewer than six or seven hours increases infection risk.

Move your body, but don't overdo it. Regular, moderate exercise strengthens the immune system. Aim for 150 minutes of moderate activity weekly — for example, 30 minutes a day five days a week.

"You should be able to talk comfortably during your workout," say experts.

Going all-out for over 90 minutes, however, can actually suppress immunity.

Take a quality multivitamin.

Teitelbaum suggests choosing a supplement that includes these important immune-supporting nutrients:

- Vitamin D — 1,000 IU
- Vitamin A (as retinyl) — 2,000 IU
- Vitamin C — 250 mg
- Zinc — 15 mg □