

Can You Boost Your Immune System?

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During the winter months, there's often heightened interest in "boosting" the immune system to prevent illness. Many people turn to super foods, vitamins, minerals, and herbal supplements in hopes of fending off harmful microorganisms.

While protecting your health is

essential, it's important to understand that the immune system is complex. Unlike a muscle that can be flexed to grow stronger in the short term, the immune system operates through intricate processes and cannot simply be "boosted."

The immune system comprises many types of cells, known as leukocytes, which respond to microbes in various ways. In healthy individuals, the body continuously produces and regulates these cells based on need. However, scientists have yet to determine the ideal number or balance of these cells. This complexity makes it challenging to assess whether dietary or supplement interventions truly enhance immune function.

While ongoing research explores the relationship between diet and immunity, evidence remains limited. Some studies suggest that specific nutrients or herbal preparations may influence certain parts of the immune system, but it's unclear whether this translates to overall strengthened immunity. For instance, an increase in a particular antibody level doesn't necessarily mean improved protection against illness.



The Risks of Supplemental Overuse

Years of research have shown that taking large or "mega" doses of dietary supplements often provides no benefit and, in some cases, can be harmful. Excessive supplementation can interact with medications, disrupt nutrient absorption, or lead to toxic accumulations in the body.

For example:

- **Vitamin C:** Though generally safe, excessive amounts can cause diarrhea, nausea, and abdominal pain.
- **Zinc:** Prolonged use in high doses can interfere with copper absorption, lower "good" cholesterol, and even weaken immunity over time.

The notion that "if a little is good, more must be better" does not apply to dietary supplements.

Tips for Supporting Immune Health

Rather than trying to “boost” immunity, the goal should be to maintain a strong, functional immune system through consistent, healthy habits.

Here’s what you can do to reduce your risk of illness:

- Eat a balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables.
- Exercise regularly.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Limit alcohol consumption; drink in moderation if you choose to drink.
- Get adequate sleep.
- Practice good hygiene, such as frequent handwashing and safe food handling.
- Manage stress effectively.
- Avoid tobacco products.

While diet plays a key role in immune health, there isn’t a single “superfood” or nutrient that offers complete protection. Instead, focus on a plant-based diet with variety to ensure you’re getting a wide range of vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other essential nutrients.

Dietary Guidance

- **Fruits and Vegetables:** Aim for at least five servings per day.
- **Whole Grains, Legumes, and Lean Proteins:** Make these a regular part of your meals.
- **Healthy Fats:** Incorporate sources like nuts, seeds, and olive oil.

Avoid diets high in refined sugar and red meat, as these can suppress immune function. A simple way to structure your meals is to fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables, one-quarter with whole grains, and one-quarter with lean protein.

If you’re unable to meet dietary recommendations due to health issues or deficiencies, consider supplementation—but only under the guidance of a healthcare provider or registered dietitian.



The Role of Physical Activity

Regular exercise is a cornerstone of a healthy lifestyle and supports immune function. Moderate-intensity exercise improves overall health, including cardiovascular function, weight management, and bone strength, all of which contribute to a resilient immune system.

However, excessive high-intensity exercise can suppress immunity. Research shows that activities like marathon training can have a negative impact, so moderation is key.

The *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* recommend:

- **150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity** per week (e.g., brisk walking, cycling).
- **Two days of muscle-strengthening exercises** weekly (e.g., push-ups, squats, or lunges).

Find activities you enjoy and make them a regular part of your routine.

Don’t Forget to Wash Your Hands

Handwashing is a simple and effective way to remove germs and protect against illness. Make it a priority, especially during cold and flu season.

By following these evidence-based practices, you can help keep your immune system functioning well, improve your overall health, and avoid unnecessary spending on supplements.



Featured Recipe

Kale Salad with Roasted Sweet Potato & Black Beans

For complete recipe and nutrition facts: [Eating Well](#)

Cook Time: **30 minutes**

Total Time: **40 minutes**

Servings: **4**

Serving Size: **2 ½ cups**



INGREDIENTS

1 large sweet potato, cut into ½ inch thick wedges

5 tablespoons olive oil, divided

2 teaspoons ancho Chile powder

½ teaspoon salt, divided

6 medium shallots, peeled and quartered

3 tablespoons lemon juice

1 large clove garlic, grated

1 pound kale, stemmed and torn

1 (15 ounce) can no-salt-added black beans, rinsed

1 cup cooked quinoa

½ cup crumbled feta cheese

½ cup unsalted pepitas, toasted

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Position** oven racks in upper and lower thirds of oven, **preheat** oven to 425°F.
- 2. Toss** sweet potato with 1 tablespoon oil, chili powder, and ⅛ teaspoon salt on a large, rimmed baking sheet. **Toss** shallots with 1 tablespoon oil, ⅛ teaspoon salt on another large, rimmed baking sheet. **Roast** the vegetables, **flipping** once until tender about 20 minutes.
- 3.** Meanwhile, **whisk** lemon juice and garlic with the 3 remaining tablespoons oil and ¼ teaspoon salt in a large bowl.
- 4. Add** kale and **massage** with the dressing until bright green and shiny and the volume is reduced by about half.
- 5. Add** beans, quinoa, feta, pepitas and the shallots. **Toss** to combine and **serve** topped with the sweet potato.

Nutritional Information:

Serving Size: 2 ½ cup

Calories: 536; Total Fat: 28g; Monounsaturated Fat: 13; Polyunsaturated Fat: 3; Saturated Fat: 7; Protein: 20g; Total Carbohydrates: 53g; Fiber: 14g; Sodium: 809mg.

