

10 Must-Eat Immunity Boosters

It's easy to have a happy, stress-free holiday season when you're living the Smart Life because you're nourishing yourself from the inside out.

Every day, you expose your body to things that may cause infections or illness – think viruses, bacteria, mold, parasites and foreign proteins in foods. These outside agents are typically brought into your body through the mouth and nose. Your immune system is faced with the task of clearing out these bad agents, while keeping what your body needs to stay nourished and healthy.

This means keeping your immune system strong. Because 70% of your immune system is located in your digestive tract (e.g. your “gut”), it is also critical to keep your gastrointestinal systems healthy and in balance especially during the holidays when stress is higher and so are the opportunities to abandon your diet.

Here are some foods that strengthen your immune system and keep the balance of good bacteria in your gut in check:

1. Garlic – It's a known infection fighter, thanks to its high concentration of an antimicrobial called allicin. Crush garlic and let it sit for 10 to 15 minutes before cooking with it to activate the allicin (prep other veggies while you wait). Or, mix it with raw honey and eat on it's own. Trust me, it's worth the bad breath: Garlic protects you against colds, flu and possibly some cancers!

2. Leafy Greens – These antioxidant-packed and anti-inflammatory wonders protect from cancer and provide digestive support. They also bind to toxins and heavy metals in your body and flush them out so other minerals can do their job. Cook them in olive oil or coconut oil to help you absorb the fat-soluble vitamins A, E and K found in them.

3. Carotenoids – Carotenoids are fat-soluble red, orange, green and yellow pigments (beta carotene, lycopene, lutein) produced by plants, which protect against cancer, heart disease and diabetes. Examples include carrots (of course), pumpkin, sweet potatoes, butternut squash, bell peppers, all leafy greens, tomatoes and peaches.

4. Healthy Fats – You'll find these in coconut oil, olive oil and fatty cold-water fish like salmon and mackerel. They promote the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins and keep your digestive tract working like it should.

5. Olive oil – An anti-inflammatory featuring oleic acid (omega-9 monounsaturated fatty acid) and vitamin E.

6. Coconut oil – This immunity revver boasts lauric acid, a medium chain fatty acid that converts to monolaurin in the body. Monolaurin protects you against lipid-coated viruses such as herpes, HIV and measles. Plus, staph and strep bacteria are also deactivated by lauric acid.

7. Ginger – This virus and bacteria obliterator does it all! It's an antioxidant and anti-inflammatory, plus it helps ease digestive issues. Make a quick Ginger Tea: Chop a 1-inch slice of ginger into tiny bits and steep in 1 cup of hot water. Add lemon, nutmeg and cardamom for flavor. Sip and boost immunity!

8. Seeds – Pumpkin seeds are a fantastic source of zinc, a powerhouse immunity booster. Sesame seeds also relieve constipation, aid digestion, and stimulate blood circulation. Load up!

9. Mushrooms – Mother Nature's antivirals, these little wonders are excellent disease fighters. Button mushrooms (white, cremini, portobello) are teeming with selenium (which fuels white blood cells in fighting infection) and B vitamins. Shiitake, maitake, and reishi also boast incredible anti-cancer properties.

10. Yogurt and Kefir – Both contain live active cultures that can help balance the gut bacteria, suppress harmful bacteria, and treat/prevent diarrhea. Both can be made with non-dairy ingredients for vegans.