Winter is cold-and-flu season: A flu bug usually hits us hard and fast, and the common cold can linger for up to three weeks. It’s not easy to combat a cold or flu virus, as we have no cure-all like antibiotics for bacterial infections. Most people are familiar with echinacea, vitamin C or zinc, but there are a lot of other important nutrients you need to keep you healthy and boost your immune system.

The immune system uses a variety of cells and mechanisms to fight a virus and keep you healthy. These systems require all of the essential dietary macronutrients, such as carbohydrates, protein, fat and water, as well as a host of micronutrients.

Small, but critical

Micronutrients are nutrients needed in very small, but critical, amounts for health. They include vitamins, minerals and essential (omega-3 and omega-6) fatty acids.

Antioxidants, such as vitamin A and beta-carotene, vitamin E and vitamin C, as well as minerals, such as selenium and zinc, are essential for your immune system’s health. Antioxidants protect our body from cellular damage that allows disease and aging to occur.

It’s impossible to ignore how intertwined these nutrients are—and how necessary a well-balanced diet is. Eating a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables is essential for your antioxidant intake. Variety helps ensure you are getting all of these nutrients, as different fruits and vegetables have varying amounts. All fruits and vegetables contain vitamin C, for example, but for vitamin A, seek out those that are yellow and orange, such as squash. Vitamin E is found in wheat germ and in dark, leafy greens; selenium and zinc are found in meats, seafood, legumes and nuts.

- Vitamin A helps the absorption of vitamins C, D and E, zinc and some B-vitamins.
- Vitamin E protects other fat-soluble vitamins and the cell membrane. It enhances the absorption of vitamin A and regenerates vitamin C.
- Vitamin C is essential for resistance to infections and also enhances the absorption of calcium, magnesium and iron.
- Selenium and zinc are both needed to repair other antioxidants and, when deficient, increase the duration and strength of a viral attack.
**Boost immune function**

In addition to antioxidants, many other micronutrients modulate immune function—vitamin D, the B-vitamins, including folate, B12, B2 and B6, and minerals, including iron, copper and magnesium.

- Vitamin D is very hard to get in a standard diet. Eating vitamin D-fortified foods or supplementing with cod liver oil are your best sources, in addition to getting some daily sunlight.

- B-vitamins are in greatest concentrations in whole grains and legumes.

- Folate is found in legumes and dark, leafy greens.

- Magnesium is found in grains and dark, leafy greens.

- Copper is found in nuts, beans, potatoes and meat.

- Animal meats are the best sources of iron and B12. For vegetarians, and especially vegans, getting supplemental iron and B12 should be discussed with your doctor.

**Fatty acids are essential**

Some people react with hesitation when told to eat fat, but it's important to remember some fats are not only good for you, they are essential for cellular and immune-system integrity.

Most Americans get enough omega-6 fatty acids, so recommendations generally focus on increasing our omega-3 fatty-acid intake. Flax seeds, walnuts, cold-water fish and fish oils are excellent sources of omega-3 fatty acids.

**If a cold strikes**

If you come down with a cold, wash your hands often and stay home to avoid spreading the virus to others. Support your immune system by resting and eating well.

Eat easy-to-digest soups and cooked vegetables. Soups help you stay hydrated. Your body needs water to create more immune cells and flush out the virus, so drink at least half your body weight in ounces of water daily. Decrease your intake of simple sugars and fruit juices, as sugar decreases the effectiveness of the immune system. A lot of people also find relief by decreasing their intake of mucous-producing foods, such as dairy, wheat and eggs.

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