
Eat Well to Help Reduce Your Risk of Cold and Flu

Focus on Fruits and Vegetables

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Oranges can help keep you healthy during cold and flu season.

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Can your diet really reduce your risk of catching a [cold or influenza](#)? Nutrition expert [Lisa Hark PhD, RD](#), director of the Nutrition Education and Prevention Program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, certainly thinks so. Dr. Hark explained to me how diet and other smart lifestyle choices will help you to avoid the sniffles, stuffy nose and aches of the cold, as well as the outright misery of influenza.

According to Dr. Hark, food and healthy lifestyle choices boost your immune system, and that can prevent you from coming down with colds and flu. The key is not waiting until you get sick to make these changes; you need to revamp your diet and lifestyle *before* the cold and flu bugs get to you.

Here are Dr. Hark's tips:

Rely on Real Food, Not Vitamins

Foods are better than dietary supplements for the prevention of colds and flu because you get the whole nutritional package. For example, Dr. Hark points out, eating an orange is better for you than just taking vitamin C because the orange offers you a combination of nutrients -- magnesium, potassium, folate, vitamin B6, and [antioxidant](#)-rich flavonoids.

While we know that vitamin C is important for a healthy immune system, studies don't show that taking massive doses of vitamin C helps to prevent colds and flu at all. However, we do know that

eating fruits and vegetables high in vitamin C will help to keep your immune system strong. Your immune system is what protects you from viral infections, and the foods you eat have a major impact on your immune system's ability to fight off colds and flu. The reason that fruits and vegetables do a better job of keeping your immune system ready is because they also contain vitamins A and E, as well as the flavonoids that work along side vitamin C to keep your immune system and your whole body healthy.

Eat More Fruits and Vegetables

So now that you know you need to eat lots of fruits and vegetables to keep your immune system strong, the next step is to actually make it happen. People tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables in the winter, which is the opposite of what you should be doing. Everyone needs at least five servings of fruits and vegetables every day to get adequate vitamins, minerals, fiber and antioxidants -- all things we need for a healthy immune system.

One way to increase your intake of fruits and vegetables is to incorporate juice into your diet. Not just any juice will do, though. Make sure you choose 100% juices, as other juice drinks contain extra sugar and empty calories. You can learn more about the benefits of 100% juice at the [Florida Department of Citrus website](#).

For the best prices, be sure to browse your grocery store's produce aisle for fresh fruits and vegetables that are in-season. Oranges and grapefruits are usually cheaper in the winter, so cold and flu season is the perfect time to load up on citrus fruits.

Dr. Hark assures us that eating frozen fruits and vegetables is another economical and convenient way to improve your diet and prevent colds and flu. Frozen vegetable selections range from very inexpensive bags of basic peas, corn and green beans to artfully combined fruits and vegetable dishes topped with delicate sauces that you simply pop in the microwave.

Make sure that fruits and vegetables are part of every meal. You can add berries or a sliced banana to your whole grain cereal at breakfast and drink a glass of 100% orange or grapefruit juice. Pack a bunch of grapes or an apple with your sandwich for lunch, and top that sandwich with tomato slices, avocado, sprouts and lettuce. Start dinner off with a salad or vegetable soup, or serve a big salad as a healthy dinner. Keep a bowl of oranges, apples and pears on your counter top to grab as quick snacks.

Keep Up Your Healthy Diet

While you want to focus on increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables you eat, don't forget to choose other healthy foods to supply nutrients your immune system needs. A healthy balanced diet with lean meats, fish, poultry, low-fat dairy, legumes, whole grains, nuts and seeds provides your body with all of the nutrients you need for general health. A healthy body tends to have a healthier immune system.

Protein sources such as lean meats, dairy, eggs and legumes are especially important because they supply the amino acids that your body needs to build the components of your immune system. Lean meats also contain iron and zinc; deficiencies of these minerals can depress your immune system.

Of course, avoiding unhealthy food is important too. Stay away from excess sugar and unhealthy fats, such as saturated fat and trans fats. Dr. Hark suggests being prepared by keeping healthy snacks handy so you won't be so tempted to eat less healthy options. Try dried fruit or trail mix.

What If You Do Get Sick?

Good nutrition is still important if you catch a cold or influenza. Dr. Hark says that even when you are sick, you need to eat when you can. Focus on getting three meals per day, and don't forget to keep eating lots of fruits and vegetables. It is important to get enough energy from the foods you eat while you are recuperating -- you may not be running around and exerting much, but your body is working hard to get better. Hark also stresses the importance of preventing dehydration. Drink fluids throughout the day such as water and 100% juices. Tired of plain water? Add a splash of juice to water or seltzer for a little variety.

What Else You Can Do to Prevent Colds and Flu?

Eating a healthy diet is just part of the picture. Dr. Hark has other tips to help you stay healthy:

Wash your hands. Your hands come in contact with germs throughout the day. The best way to get rid of them is by washing your hands thoroughly. This is an important part of food safety, too. Wash your hands before preparing meals, after handling raw meats and before serving foods. Make sure everyone at the table has washed their hands, as well.

Get enough rest. [The National Sleep Foundation](#) tells us that most kids don't get enough sleep, and many adults don't either. When you don't get enough sleep, you are more likely to get sick.

Get your flu shots. Dr. Hark says that it doesn't matter whether you are young or old, getting a [flu shot](#) is a good way to prevent the flu. Vaccination is even more important for the elderly and people with respiratory conditions.

Get some exercise. There is strong evidence that people who exercise don't get sick as often. Exercise is important all year, even in the dark and cold of winter. Dr. Hark suggests having a plan to keep active in the winter, such as walking on a treadmill, using exercise videos, jumping rope, or going to the gym. And don't forget to bring your workout gear when you travel; many hotels have workout rooms and swimming pools.

Thanks to Dr. Hark's suggestions, getting a cold or flu doesn't have to be an inevitable part of winter.

Source:

Interview with Lisa Hark PhD, RD, director of Nutrition Education Programs of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, December 3, 2007.