

Eating the right foods boosts the immune system

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Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

This fall the Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association administered 670 flu vaccinations, and other health care providers across the state vaccinated thousands more. Although the number of flu cases in Connecticut was at a new low in mid-January, nationally the flu epidemic spiked at about that time. The Forman School in Litchfield had so many sick students that it closed for a few days in late January and early February.

Each year around 20 per cent of the U.S. population catches the flu, 200,000 are sick enough to be hospitalized and 36,000 die from it. While this year's batch of flu vaccine was not quite as good as hoped, it was still deemed effective in 52 percent of healthy adults who were vaccinated.

In recent columns we've covered the importance of hygiene in staying healthy during cold and flu season. But there's yet another mighty weapon in your arsenal that can improve your chances of warding off those nasty bugs out there, and that's eating foods that boost immunity.

"When teaching my patients basic nutrition "survival skills" I emphasize that the immune system is influenced by overall health, and a balanced diet is key," says Anita V. Grinevics, MS, RD, CSG, CD-N, consulting nutritionist to Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association.

"Not only are essential nutrients critical for the production and maintenance of key germ-fighting cells in the immune system, but a balanced diet also has a strong effect on the vascular system. The bloodstream is the route along which infection-fighting cells travel throughout the body to where they're needed."

There are, Grinevics said, certain foods that, when eaten as part of a balanced diet, can play a role in immune response and overall health.

Garlic: Its sulphur-containing compounds have immune-boosting properties that are effective against bacterial, viral, fungal and parasitic infections and enhance the immune system.

Omega-3 fats: Omega-3s are essential immune boosters that increase the activity of the white blood cells that destroy bacteria. These fats also help strengthen cell membranes, speeding up healing and strengthening resistance to infection.

You'll find omega-3 fats in fatty fish, such as salmon, mackerel, and tuna, flax oil and flaxseeds, omega-3 eggs, nuts and seeds. "To boost omega-3 in your diet, try adding ground flaxseed to yogurt, baked goods, cereals or smoothies," she suggested.

Green Tea: Green tea is rich in antioxidants, and studies show that it may support immune health in many ways, even inhibiting a virus' ability to replicate, which,

Grinevics said, “may offer an offensive strategy for preventing a cold, as well as improving the body's overall immune response.”

Vitamins and Minerals: The tried and true vitamins A, C, and E, the B-vitamins, zinc and magnesium are, Grinevics said, “either potent anti-oxidants or are involved in the enzymes that help detoxify damaging chemicals.” She suggests daily intake of pumpkin seeds, yams, soy, and rice.

You’ll also find these wonder nutrients in all those things you should be eating all the time, including green leafy vegetables, fruits, especially citrus, kiwi and strawberries, whole grains in all their forms, fish, and poultry among many other good foods.

Probiotics: Yogurt and other cultured dairy products such as natural cheese, kefir and buttermilk offer strains of “friendly” or beneficial bacteria. “They actually envelop and ‘eat’ invading harmful bacteria,” Grinevics said. “Probiotics increase the activity of the cells that ingest dead and invading cells, increase antibody production and naturally boost your immune system.”

Plus, she said, “probiotics produce natural antibiotics that inhibit the growth and activity of pathogenic microflora, the harmful, disease-producing organisms in your gastrointestinal tract.” Look for probiotics that contain *Lactobacillus bulgaricus*, *L. casei*, *Bifidobacterium* and *Streptococcus Thermophilus*.

Finally, Grinevics said, herbal remedies such as echinacea and astragalus show promise for boosting the immune system, but should not be taken for more than two weeks at a time.