

Which foods help to fight infection?

As temperatures fall in the UK, it's the time of year when infections like the common cold and flu to spread more easily. But what you eat can provide a level of protection for you and your loved ones.

When your body is fighting an infection, it needs all the help it can get. Of course, rest and hydration both play vital roles in recovery and good health. But food provides the nutrients and energy to help overcome illness and get you back on your feet. So, which food groups are best when you're trying to shake off an infection?

How do foods fight infection?

You've probably heard the phrase 'you are what you eat' and often associate it with weight loss and general health. However, when you're sick, food is key for ensuring you have nutrients, energy, and a strong immune function. While it may be tempting to stay in bed and eat comfort food, poor nutritional choices can slow down the recovery process and make some symptoms worse.

Eating a [balanced diet](#), gives you essential vitamins, minerals, and nutrients. All of which contribute to maintaining and strengthening your body and its functions. From organ health and bone strength and to fighting infections, good food will benefit your current and long-term health.

Fruits and vegetables

When considering which foods are best to fight infection, fruit and veg probably have the most impact as they contain a range of vitamins and minerals to help your immune system. Nutritionists consider variety to be beneficial as different fruit and vegetables contain unique proportions of minerals, vitamins, and micronutrients. Eating the 'rainbow' – lots of different coloured fruits – will help get all the variety needed into your body.

Vitamin C is important as it improves your body's ability to fight harmful germs while strengthening your defence against invading germs. Citrus fruits, strawberries, tomatoes, broccoli, brussels sprouts, spinach, and bell peppers are all excellent sources of vitamin C.

Vitamin A is also effective for improving immunity and can even protect against certain types of cancer. Beta carotene is the primary source of vitamin A in your diet, for which carrots are a great source. But any orange, yellow, or red vegetables are ideal for increasing your vitamin A levels.

Libby Linford, registered Nutritional Therapist and founder of the [Surrey Centre for Nutrition](#) explains:

"The importance of fruit and vegetables cannot be underestimated when it comes to positive impacts on the immune system. Eating a variety of vegetables and some fruit supplies important fibres (prebiotics) to the beneficial bacteria, helping them to grow, flourish, and regulate immune activity. Fruit and veg also supply important nutrients such as vitamins and minerals required by the immune system such as vitamins A and C and minerals such as magnesium and zinc."

Protein

Protein helps your body grow, repair, oxygenate, digest food, and regulate hormones. So it's safe to say it has an important job. Getting enough protein is a cornerstone of a balanced diet, especially when fighting infections. A lack of dietary protein can impact your immune system and weaken your defences against diseases by disrupting the production of T cells and antibodies.

Insufficient protein reduces your energy levels and your body's ability to repair itself. Both are crucial for overcoming the symptoms of an infection and a successful recovery period.

Many fantastic protein sources include seafood, poultry, lean meats, beans and legumes, eggs, and certain dairy products. Also, such a range of protein-rich foods allows for a balanced and healthy diet regardless of dietary choices and restrictions.

Herbs and spices

Herbs and spices help to boost immunity and fight infections thanks to the anti-inflammatory and anti-bacterial compounds within. [Ginger](#) and [turmeric](#) are go-to herbs and spices – ginger is a great antioxidant and turmeric has anti-bacterial properties. Both are easy enough to introduce into your daily diet by adding them to hot drinks, soups, sauces, salads, and much more.

Also, fresh leaves such as coriander, mint, and basil contain antioxidants and can have a calming effect. [Green tea](#) is another ideal choice as it has a high polyphenol content, known for being an antioxidant and benefiting our immune system.

Probiotics

[Probiotics](#) are good bacteria, also called microorganisms, Some are already inside your body, and others are in fermented foods such as yoghurts. Probiotics stimulate and strengthen your immune system, but their key benefit is regulating your gut health. Doing so ensures you digest food properly and get as much help from its nutrients.

A healthy gut gets the most out of the foods you eat and maximises health benefits. Poor gut health can cause inflammation and reduces your body's ability to absorb nutrients. This means you'll be getting less of what your body needs, and your immune system will be busy fighting inflammation.

Linford says probiotics are beneficial bacteria that reside in a healthy digestive tract. We can get probiotics from foods such as [fermented produce](#) like kimchi, sauerkraut, kefir, kombucha, and yoghurt.

Nuts and seeds

[Nuts and seeds](#) are a quick and easy way to improve your diet. They may be small, but they offer many benefits and are simple to add to your diet. Whether you snack on a handful or add them to your favourite meals – your immune system will benefit. Nuts and seeds are rich in minerals and fatty acids, nutrient-dense, and contain vitamin E – which is crucial for cell repair after infection.

A healthy diet is vital for making your body work as it should and fighting off infections. The food groups mentioned in this article can easily be included in your daily diet and benefit your health.

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