



Stay healthy  
this winter

# How to supercharge your IMMUNITY

As the nights draw in and the days start to turn chilly, thoughts of coughs and colds loom. And research from both Sweden and Scotland show that when the UK has its first low-humidity, below-freezing week of the year, outbreaks of respiratory infections spike.

Our winter lifestyle makes it easier for germs to spread, too. Nutritionist Sarah Flower explains, “We tend to spend more time indoors in the winter, in our central-heated homes, without open windows to give us fresh air. This creates the perfect environment for bugs to thrive.”

The situation is not helped by the way our immune system naturally behaves and reacts in the colder months, either. “Immune cells are less likely to ‘sacrifice’ themselves to prevent the spread of viruses in colder temperatures,” says naturopathic nutritionist Amy Morris. “Whereas under warmer conditions, cells surrender themselves to protect the body, preventing the spread of illness. There is also evidence that viruses travel more easily through dry air. It is not necessarily the cold weather that causes illnesses, it just makes it easier to spread the virus.”

Your immune system is your body’s frontline defence against illnesses, germs and other harmful micro-organisms, so it is incredibly important that we help it provide us with the protection that we need.

## Essential winter vitamins

The biggest change our bodies notice in the winter is the light levels. Even when it’s sunny during these months, it’s not possible in the UK for us to absorb the required amount of vitamin D from sunshine – and the vitamin is an immunity hero.

“If you don’t get enough, you’re more susceptible to illness,” explains nutritionist Karen Alexander (Nutritiousroots.com). “I would recommend a supplement with a 1,000IU amount of vitamin D daily, starting from September through to April at least.”

As well as upping our vitamin D levels, we also need to ensure we are getting enough vitamin C. Sarah adds, “Vitamin C is extremely helpful when fighting infection, so at the first sign of a cold, increase your intake by eating plenty of berries, citrus fruits, papayas, broccoli and red peppers, which will help keep you protected.” A good supplement will ensure you are getting enough. The vitamin is also important as it helps the body “unlock” other nutrients from our foods, too.

## Gut protection

In recent years, the link between our gut and our overall health has been firmly established. “Around 80 per cent of our immune system is in the gut, so if you have an overgrowth of bad bacteria, your immune system will take a knock, and you will be more susceptible to viruses,”

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says Karen. So, making sure you include a probiotic, in tablet or powder form, and foods that encourage good bacteria is sensible. Fermented foods like sauerkraut and kombucha also help good bacteria thrive.

## Fish oil for immunity

It can seem strange, but if you want to boost your immunity, then it’s worth including a fish oil supplement in your diet. Omega-3 reduces inflammation in your body, and supplements enhance the functioning of immune cells.

“Fatty acids are very important for your cellular communication,” says Karen. “We need some inflammation [in our bodies], but we need to keep it in check – and most people don’t get enough omega-3.” It can be

naturally found in oily fish and seafood. Plant-based sources include chia and flax seeds, some nuts and soya beans – although the plant sources contain a different form of omega-3, which you need more of.

## Lifestyle choices

As well as supplementing our diets, we can help boost our immunity with the lifestyle choices we make. Stress damages the immune system and makes us more prone to infections. Karen explains, “Chronic stress causes a reduction in the absorption of nutrients because it affects digestion, which impacts thyroid function. It will cause the body to prioritise the production of stress hormones over others, and this impacts immunity.” Address the sources of stress in your life and take measures to minimise their effects.

Also, make sure you stay hydrated. This is easier in the summer when we feel warm,

but in the winter, we can easily forget to have enough. “Drinking plenty of water helps keep the cells flushed and prevents toxins building up in the system,” says Sarah. “Grab some herbal teas as they can really help, especially sage, liquorice, turmeric or green tea. You can also try immune-boosting broths. I am a huge fan of bone broth, packed with collagen, immune-boosting properties, vitamins and minerals.”

Stress makes us more prone to infections

When we sleep, we also fight bugs, so make sure you are not burning the candle at both ends. It can be tempting to snuggle in for the winter and abandon exercise, too, but that’s not going to help your immunity. “Exercise increases blood flow, which promotes the process of expelling toxic waste out of your body,” says Amy. “The improved blood circulation also helps the movement of antibodies and white blood cells around the body, which is important for fighting infections. As little as 20 minutes of walking, five days a week, can help your immune system perform at its best.”

## WINTER SUPPLEMENTS

Keep your body in tip-top condition with a high-quality vitamin D supplement like Wild Nutrition Food-Grown Vitamin D, £10.

At the first sign of a cold, try blitzing it with a targeted mineral salt like New Era Mineral Tissue

Salts Q and J, £8.79 each.

When it comes to omega-3, UnoCardio1000, £35, from Water For Health, has been independently labelled the “must-have” fish oil to incorporate into your daily health routine for three consecutive years.

Words: Caroline Blight. Photos: Shutterstock