

BUILD A STRONG IMMUNE SYSTEM: MYTH VS FACT

You may have noticed that young children can often be susceptible to frequent coughs and colds, as their immune system continues to develop. But is there anything you can do to support this process?

Here we look at some myths and facts about nutrition and the immune system and provide some tips for helping both their and your immune system work as it should.

MYTH: CERTAIN FOODS ARE IMMUNE BOOSTING

The term 'boost' your immune system is misleading. A boosted immune system is one that is responding to something such as a food allergen or disease-causing microorganisms. Instead, it's important to follow general guidelines for good health to naturally keep immune systems working as they should do.

Every part of your body, including your immune system, works better when supported by healthy living strategies and protected from assaults such as stress and lack of sleep.

MYTH: (FOR ADULTS): MODERN DAY FOODS ARE LOW IN VITAMINS AND MINERALS, SO YOU NEED TO TAKE SUPPLEMENTS

A varied and balanced diet provides the right quantities of vitamins and minerals that most adults need for their immune system to work normally. Remember there are no 'magic bullet' foods or supplements for the immune system.

However, the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) does recommend that all children aged 6 months to five years should be given vitamin supplements containing vitamins A, C and D every day, though babies who are having more than 500ml (about a pint) of infant formula a day shouldn't be given vitamin supplements because formula is fortified.

DHSC also recommends folic acid supplements during pregnancy.

FACT: VITAMIN D SUPPLEMENTS ARE IMPORTANT FOR GOOD HEALTH

Vitamin D contributes to the normal functioning of the immune system. While we can get most of the vitamins and minerals we need from our diet, Vitamin D is a bit different as it is only found in a small number of foods (for example oily fish, eggs, fortified margarines and some fortified breakfast cereals). One in five adults in the UK population have low vitamin D status.

The body creates vitamin D from direct sunlight on the skin when outdoors. Between October and early March we don't get enough vitamin D from sunlight so DHSC recommends taking a vitamin D supplement.

Children aged one to four years old should be given a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms of vitamin D. Advice on children under one is available [here](#).

Adults, including pregnant and breastfeeding women, should also take a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms of vitamin D during the autumn and winter. From about late March / early April to the end of September, most people should normally be able to get all the vitamin D they need from sunlight.

You can buy vitamin D supplements or vitamin drops containing vitamin D (for under-fives) at most pharmacies and supermarkets. Women and children who qualify for the Healthy Start scheme can get free supplements containing the recommended amounts of vitamin D. See the [Healthy Start website](#) for more information.

FACT: MORE MAY NOT NECESSARILY BE BETTER

Whilst deficiency in vitamins and minerals can have an impact on immunity, once 'adequate status' (where your body is not deficient) has been achieved, higher intakes are not beneficial. In fact, too high a dose can cause the body more work and some vitamins and minerals can be toxic at high doses.

That's why high doses of vitamin and minerals should not be taken (unless you are advised to do so by your GP or healthcare professional).

Try to eat a balanced diet of vegetables and fruits, wholegrains, protein, fats, dairy (or plant alternatives). This will provide you with vitamins that are important for the immune system (e.g. vitamin A, B6, B12 C and D) and minerals (e.g. zinc, selenium and iron).

Under the [Healthy Start scheme](#), eligible families can get free vouchers every week to spend on milk and plain fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables. You can also get free vitamins.

IMMUNE SYSTEM-SUPPORTING TIPS

To help your immune system work its best, try to focus on eating a balanced diet, staying active, getting fresh air and trying to sleep well.

Here are some foods that provide nutrients thought to be important for the immune system to work normally:

	Vitamin A	carrots, sweet potato, butternut squash, cantaloupe melon, papaya, liver, cheese, eggs and dark green leafy vegetables
	Vitamin B6	poultry, fish, fortified breakfast cereals, egg yolk, yeast extract, soya beans, sesame seeds and some fruit and vegetables, such as banana, avocado and green pepper
	Vitamin B12	meat, fish, shellfish, milk, cheese, fromage frais, eggs, fortified yeast extract and fortified breakfast cereals
	Vitamin C	citrus fruits, blackcurrants, strawberries, papaya, kiwi, green vegetables, peppers and tomatoes
	Copper	bread, breakfast cereals, rice, quinoa, meat, fish and shellfish, pulses, avocado, dried fruit, nuts and seeds
	Vitamin D	oily fish, eggs, fortified breakfast cereals, fortified spreads and fortified dairy products
	Folate	green vegetables, pulses, oranges, berries, nuts and seeds, cheeses, bread and fortified breakfast cereals
	Iron	offal, red meat, beans, pulses, nuts and seeds, fish (such as canned sardines, cockles and mussels), quinoa, wholemeal bread and dried fruit
	Selenium	nuts and seeds (for example Brazil nuts, cashews and sunflower seeds), eggs, offal poultry, fish and shellfish
	Zinc	meat, poultry, cheese, some shellfish (including crab, cockles and mussels), nuts and seeds (in particular pumpkin seeds and pine nuts), wholegrain breakfast cereals and wholegrain and seeded breads