

JOEL FUHRMAN, MD

Healthy eating can help protect you from the flu

Cold and flu are a larger burden than we may think.

Between treatments, illness-

compromised productivity, and lost workdays, it is estimated that the common cold alone

costs the U.S. \$40 billion each year.

We all know the basics for reducing exposure — wash your hands, avoid touching your face, and avoid being exposed to people who are already ill. Some people may choose the influenza vaccine, however it is important to know that it is not very effective.

An independent analysis of flu vaccine studies by the Cochrane Collaboration found that even under ideal conditions (vaccine completely matching circulating flu virus), 4 percent of unvaccinated people and 1 percent of vaccinated people became infected — only a minor benefit.

The authors estimated that under typical conditions, 100 people need to be vaccinated to avoid one set of influenza symptoms or you would have

to be vaccinated every year for 100 years, to save yourself one flu episode.

Interestingly, the study showed that flu vaccine did not significantly affect the number of people hospitalized or working days lost, and did not prevent flu-associated complications or those rare flu-associated deaths.

Those of us who eat healthfully need not worry about the dangers of the flu. Excellent nutrition can reduce our vulnerability to infection and reduce the length and severity of illness if we do become infected.

Many micronutrients are required to support proper function of the immune system, and phytochemicals from colorful produce have additional anti-microbial and immune-boosting effects:

Mushrooms

Mushrooms have a unique ability to activate the body's natural immune defenses. More exotic varieties like reishi and shiitake mushrooms have beneficial effects on immune cells, and even the common white button mushrooms may enhance immune defenses in the mouth and respiratory tract.

Remember that mushrooms should only be eaten cooked: several raw culinary mushrooms contain a potentially harmful compound called agaritine, and cooking mushrooms significantly reduces the agaritine content.

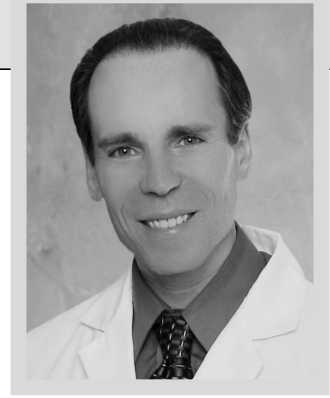
Cruciferous vegetables

The cruciferous family of vegetables includes kale, collards, mustard greens, arugula, watercress, broccoli, broccoli rabe, cabbage, cauliflower, kohlrabi and more.

In addition to their anti-cancer effects, cruciferous vegetable phytochemicals also support the immune system and have antimicrobial properties.

To maximize the benefits from cruciferous vegetables, chop them finely, eat them raw and chew them well; the enzyme that produces the active compounds (called ITCs) is activated by disrupting the plant cells and deactivated by heat.

However, you can still get ITCs from your cooked cruciferous vegetables: chop them finely before you begin to cook and add some raw cruciferous



to the meal. For instance, if you are eating cooked broccoli, add some shredded cabbage to your salad to produce some extra ITCs.

Berries

Berries are powerful anti-cancer foods that also offer protection against viruses. Antioxidants called flavonoids, which are abundant in berries, have antiviral activity.

In fact, if you do get the flu, taking anthocyanin-rich elderberry juice may even shorten the duration of your symptoms. Berries and grapes are also rich in resveratrol, another antioxidant phytochemical with strong antiviral effects.

Plus, strawberries are high in vitamin C, which protects immune cells from oxidative damage. The benefits of berries go far beyond cold and flu protection. Flavonoids activate the body's natural detoxification enzymes, block the growth of cancer cells, decrease inflammation, and support proper blood pressure regulation.

Onions and garlic

There is no convincing evidence for using garlic supplements for symptoms of the common cold. However, eating garlic and onions daily has clear benefits when it comes to cancer prevention, and may also help to build immune defenses and fight off respiratory viruses.

Like cruciferous vegetables, the active compounds in onions and garlic are produced when the plant cells are disrupted, so they are best eaten raw, chopped finely and chewed well.

Appropriate supplements

Vitamin D and zinc are important players in immune function, so maintaining adequate stores of these micronutrients will also help to protect against cold and flu.

Children given vitamin D supplements throughout the winter reduced the occurrence of flu compared to a placebo group, and taking supplemental zinc regularly was found to slightly reduce the number of colds caught by children.

Since vitamin D is not readily available in the food supply, and zinc is not highly absorbed from plant foods, well-designed supplements are a good choice.

If you do get a cold, treat it wisely. Many cold remedies are ineffective, and some may even prolong the illness.

For example, megadoses of vitamin C do not prevent colds or reduce symptoms, and fever-reducing medications actually hinder the body's attack on the infection.

In my book *Super Immunity*, I evaluate a number of common cold and flu remedies.

Don't be alarmed if your cold symptoms last longer than you expect. On average, patients report that their common cold symptoms last one and a half to two weeks. In children, earaches tend to last anywhere from less than one day to nine days; sore throat two to seven days; cough up to 25 days; and the common cold seven to 15 days.

In time, the body will clear the virus on its own. Remember, over-the-counter medications merely mask symptoms, and may even impair healing.

However, if you experience a sudden worsening of symptoms, especially including labored breathing, or a fever above 103 degrees for three days, then it is time to call the doctor.

Dr. Fuhrman is a New York Times best-selling author and board certified family physician specializing in lifestyle and nutritional medicine.

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