

NUTRITION & COVID-19

The headlines around nutrition and COVID-19 are bold and forceful and many have tried to capitalise on people's vulnerability and fear of contracting the virus. This resource aims to set the record straight, providing you with the evidence around the role nutrition plays in lowering the risk of contracting, management and recovery of COVID-19.

Let's take a look at what immunity is and how it is developed and maintained.

Immunity is not based on your diet alone. Our gut microbiota (GM; the trillions of microbes living along our digestive tract) play a major role in our body's defence system. Our GM trains our immune system from birth, and our gut microbes are in constant communication with our immune cells. In addition, our GM maintains the integrity of the cells lining our gastrointestinal tract. This helps us to absorb essential nutrients including vitamins and carbohydrates.

Starting from birth, you are coated with microbes from your mother's vaginal cavity. In addition, you also received beneficial microbes, which entered your gut through breastfeeding. As you grew, your exposure to the environment built your gut microbe diversity further, and each person is uniquely exposed. Your diet and lifestyle then compliment these microbes by providing the environment they need to flourish. A good diversity of microbe is associated with good immunity. A healthy GM also plays a role in keeping populations of harmful bacteria in check. The integrity of our GM can be disturbed by events such as a COVID-19 infection, but it can be restored and maintained through our diets.

Can I boost my immunity through my diet/supplements?

Put simply, you cannot boost your immune system with any one specific food or supplement, thus preventing you from contracting COVID-19. Good Hygiene practices, wearing a mask, getting vaccinated and social distancing remains the best method.

There is no doubt that a weakened immune system makes us more vulnerable to infections, but on the other hand you don't want to have an overactive immune system, as this can lead to autoimmune conditions. There are key nutrients involved in our immunity, and deficiency can lead to immune malfunction. However, if you are not deficient, excessive supplementation will have no impact. In fact, research has been undertaken to test if very large doses of these key nutrients can have an effect in COVID prevention, and the results were not significant.



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So how do we achieve a balance between the two?

- 1 Following a well-balanced diet by including foods from all the major food groups remains the best method to maintain immunity.
- 2 You can identify any of the following key nutrients that may be lacking in your diet:
- 3 Look after your gut health by loading your diet with plenty plant foods. Plants are filled with gut-loving fibre and flavonoids, linked to lower levels of inflammation.

But I have heard a lot about Vitamin D and COVID Prevention

A rapid review of studies was conducted by SACN, NICE and PHE and the conclusion was that there was inadequate evidence to support Vitamin D and the prevention of COVID-19. However, adequate Vitamin D for immune function continues to be important and ensuring adequate sun exposure is just as important as including adequate sources in our diet. Without adequate sun exposure our body cannot convert Vitamin D from our foods into the active compound. With self-isolation and less outside interaction this could prove to be difficult and supplementation may need to be considered.

What about the other elements of life outside diet that can influence immunity?

Stress/Mental Health: Stress has been linked with increased risk of the common cold and other respiratory infections, so try simple strategies such as 15 minutes of mindfulness to relax and unwind.

Sleep: A good night's sleep ensures the body is well rested and that stress is reduced in the body, resulting in healthy function of all body systems, including your immune system.

Physical Activity: Staying active increases blood flow, reduces stress and inflammation in the body, and in turn supports a healthy immune system

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