

10 STEPS TO *superhealth*



Take charge of your health and support your immunity with these easy ideas

10 ways to support your immune system

We are going through times of uncertainty and fear in relation to global and personal health. One of the most empowering things you can do at times when so much feels out of your control is to manage your health by taking charge of your diet.

Your immune system is the most powerful weapon you have against disease. Strong immunity means that the body is better able to fight off viruses and germs.

Here are my top tips to keep you fighting fit this month – and beyond.





Eat real food

Your body needs real, unprocessed food to stay healthy and not the processed foods you kid yourself are OK for you to eat.

Focus on eating natural, unrefined, unprocessed food as much as you can and cut out (or at least cut back on) sugar.

That means focussing on eating meat, fish, eggs and vegetarian sources of protein like tofu, beans, lentils and chickpeas, and nuts and seeds, plus a broad range of fruit and vegetables.

Follow the 80/20 rule (for the avoidance of doubt, this means eating healthily 80% of the time - think fresh apples rather than apple juice, or wholegrain bread instead of a white bread butty).



Enjoy 'happy tummy' foods

Did you know that up to 80% of your immunity to germs and disease is in your digestive system? The mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue (MALT) in the gut is part of the first line of immune defence, so getting the right balance between beneficial or 'good' gut bacteria and the 'bad' or potentially pathogenic bacteria is key.

How to do this:

The gut environment takes a beating year after year, owing to poor diets, too much sugar, stress, antibiotics and other factors. Even if you have no obvious tummy troubles, digestive health is vital, so it's worth the extra effort to take care of it. Add probiotic and prebiotic foods to your diet, as these re-populate the gut with good bacteria and feed them well enough to crowd out bad bacteria.

Here are some gut-friendly choices to get you started:

Organic, probiotic, natural yoghurt - sometimes called 'live' yoghurt.

Always buy full-fat yoghurt, as the 0% or no-fat options have increased levels of milk sugars - and fat isn't the enemy, either in life or in weight loss.

Miso soup or miso bouillon paste (add these to soups and stews).

Oats (soak first, as you would to make overnight oats, in order to release the goodness).

Onions, garlic and Jerusalem artichokes.

Green Bananas.

Beans.

Cooked, then cooled, potatoes.



Serve Chicken Soup

Did you hear that chicken soup is great when you're unwell?

If you thought it was just an old wives' tale, you'd be wrong. Research suggests that a bowl of chicken and vegetable soup can slow the speed at which neutrophils move around your body. Neutrophils are a type of white blood cell and part of the immune system, protecting your body from infection. When the neutrophils move slowly, there's a greater chance of them becoming more concentrated in the areas of your body that need the most healing. Studies have shown chicken soup to be particularly helpful in reducing symptoms in upper respiratory system infections.



Thai-style chicken soup

This lovely soup contains garlic (known for its antimicrobial qualities). Serves 4

For the paste

- 1 large red chilli, seeded
- 1 tbsp fresh ginger, grated
- 1 tsp ground turmeric
- 3 garlic cloves, crushed
- 1/2 onion, roughly chopped

For the soup

- 1 tbsp coconut oil
- 400g can coconut milk
- 400ml chicken stock
- 1 tbsp fish sauce
- 2 tbsp xylitol (or 1/2 tsp stevia)
- 2 chicken breasts, cut into small dice
- 100g broccoli, cut into small florets
- Handful sugar snap peas, halved
- Handful of coriander leaves, chopped
- 4 spring onions, sliced

Method

To make the spice paste, tip all the paste ingredients into a food processor, then add 4 tbsp of the coconut milk and whizz to form a paste.

Heat the coconut oil in a large pan, add the spice paste and cook for 1-2 mins. Add the rest of the coconut milk, stock, fish sauce and xylitol (or stevia). Bring to the boil then gently simmer for 7-10 mins.

Add the chicken to the pan and cook for 2-3 mins.

Tip in the broccoli and cook for a further minute, before adding the sugar snap peas and cooking for another minute. Pour into bowls and sprinkle over the chopped coriander and spring onions to serve.

Cook with herbs & spices

Adding flavour to food is a smart way to include delicious immune superfoods on your plate.

Garlic is a potent superfood. It is antimicrobial, thanks to the active ingredient allicin, which helps fight viruses, and has been used for thousands of years to boost the immune system and prevent sickness. To make the most of allicin, crush, chop or grate the garlic cloves and allow them to sit for a few minutes. This releases more allicin. Once formed, it is fairly resistant to heat.

Most culinary herbs contain anti-inflammatory properties due to their phytonutrients, but oregano and thyme are particularly rich. Spice up your cooking with turmeric and ginger, too, as these are well-documented immune boosters.



Say no to sugar

Even if you don't consider yourself a sugar addict, it's worth taking a look at how much you do consume - and trying to swap sugary treats for something more wholesome.

Sugar fans the flames of inflammation and affects the ability of white blood cells to fend off viruses and bacteria. In fact, the immune system stays depressed for hours after consuming sugar, according to recent studies. Enjoy raw cocoa or cacao hot chocolate on chilly evenings, adding your favourite milk or milk substitutes (with a little xylitol or stevia to sweeten, if you like). If you really miss that chocolate hit, try a few squares of pure, dark chocolate like Green & Blacks or any good chocolate with a higher cocoa content (at least 75%).



Drink more water

Staying well-hydrated is important for health in general. When it comes to bolstering your defences, water is a miracle worker. It flushes germs from your system, helps your blood to carry plenty of oxygen to your body's cells and allows those cells to absorb important nutrients.

Invest in a filter jug or bottle to avoid quaffing high levels of chlorine and fluorine along with your tap water.



Consider herbal tea

Green tea (and chamomile tea, if you're interested) can help supercharge your immunity. That's because they contain antioxidants that help battle free radicals that wreak havoc across the immune system. In truth, we don't know how large the effect really is on the immune system but, let's say the effect is there but minimal, every little helps.



A close-up photograph of a hand holding a small, glowing globe of the Earth. The hand is positioned in the lower-left foreground, with the sun shining through the fingers, creating a bright lens flare effect. The background is a vast, bright sky filled with soft, white clouds. The overall mood is warm and hopeful, symbolizing care for the planet and embracing the sun.

Hello sunshine!

As difficult as this is to achieve sometimes (particularly in winter and spring), spending sufficient time in sunlight is vital for the immune system.

Vitamin D is made by your skin absorbing sunlight, so planning an hour or two outside during daylight hours is a good reason to leave work early or take your children to the park when you'd rather sleep late. Even sitting outside while you have your morning cuppa is a good thing right now.

Expose as much of your bare skin to the sun as possible, and don't wear sunscreen during that time either as it inhibits the process.

You can boost your vitamin D levels by eating more of the following foods: oily fish (salmon, mackerel and fresh tuna), beef liver, mushrooms, cheese, egg yolks and vitamin D-fortified foods, such as dairy products and orange juice.

It's worth checking whether you are low in vitamin D, and these days it's easy to check this yourself (rather than asking your doctor) by taking a finger-prick blood spot test – ask me for recommendations.



Get enough sleep

Being tired is not good for your health. Simply, your body needs rest to stay healthy. In one study done at a private research university in Pennsylvania in the US found that, even if people said they felt fine and dandy, if they'd had less than 7 hours of sleep a night, they were three times more likely to catch a cold than people who had had an average of 8 hours or more of the ole shut-eye.



Move in a way that feels good

Your lymphatic system, a parallel universe to your bloodstream, contains a network of tissues and organs that help your body get rid of toxins and waste. Its main role is to transport a fluid called lymph around the body, which contains infection-fighting white blood cells. Unlike the blood, which moves around thanks to your heart pumping, there's no automatic way of moving lymph about. The only way to shift the stuff from A to B is by moving yourself.

A recent study from a university in North Carolina in the US showed that people who move themselves for 5 or more days a week experience 43% fewer days with upper respiratory infections (that's throat, sinuses and or lungs - basically the common cold). The aim is 30-60 minutes of exercise 5 times a week.