

On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.

Feed a Cold – with Functional Foods

It seems that no matter how familiar the symptoms of upper respiratory congestion, sore throat, headache, fatigue, and occasional fever may be, the onset of the cold season always takes us by surprise. This is puzzling as, in fact, the average one of us suffers from 2-4 colds each year. And if we're under 12 or so, that number skyrockets to 6-8.



With all of the billions of dollars spent on high tech advances of modern medicine, you might well expect a cure for the common cold by now. And your expectation would be well-founded. But it's not so easy, say the experts, as there are more than 200 viruses, bacteria and even some fungi that can cause cold-like symptoms. There are, however, a multitude of steps you can take to keep your immune system strong, so that if one or 100 of these pathogens comes knocking at your door, you'll be ready.

Functional foods first

Functional foods are foods that provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition. Mushrooms are a perfect example. They are a potent source of immune enhancing activity, and there are three in particular, that have elicited substantial excitement from the medical community. Of an estimated 38,000 species of mushrooms, those that have grabbed the most medical attention in recent years are maitake, shitake and reishi. In addition to offering a wealth of protein, fiber, B vitamins, and vitamin C, these medicinal mushrooms have been shown to boost heart health, lower the risk of cancer, reduce

inflammation, fight allergies, help balance blood glucose levels and promote healthy immune function. This last feat is where their ability to ward off cold and flu germs comes into play. Surprised? Remember after all, that Sir Alexander Fleming developed the first antibiotics in 1928 from the fungus [*Penicillium notatum*](#).

Whey protein is another functional food that's been getting accolades in the nutritional press lately. Whey is the liquid portion of the milk left when milk protein, or casein, coagulates to become curd. It seems that Little Miss Muffet was definitely on to something good, although whether or not she knew that pure whey protein is a source of highly digestible, immune-boosting and regenerative components would definitely be a source of debate. Certainly, body builders are very familiar with whey protein as an adjunct to building muscle mass. But for the immune system, the secret sauce in whey is a protein called lactoferrin, with several studies suggesting that this protein plays an important as a first line of defense against all types of infection.

Be careful when shopping for whey protein, however. Its precious cargo of lactoferrin, immunoglobulins, serum albumin and active peptides are destroyed by high heat pasteurization. Just like milk, the less processing the better. Look for words like "low heat" or "non-denatured" on the label to get a full complement of beneficial components.

When the bugs come knocking

When the first sniffle eventually does show up in my family, I reach first for the Elderberry syrup or extract. Derived from the Black Elder, European Elder or Boor Tree, many traditional cultures felt this tree was so special that they refused to burn its wood or use it for carpentry, lest it bring bad luck to the household. Its berries, however, have been used for centuries to strengthen and maintain the immune & respiratory systems. Taken at the first sign of cold or flu, Elderberry will generally reduce the course of the infection significantly by nourishing the immune system with vitamin C and specialized flavanoids called anthocyanins, a type of health-promoting plant pigment. In addition to the Elderberry, I make sure my winter medicine chest is stocked with plenty of green tea extract; astragalus, a traditional Chinese herb used to strengthen the lungs and treat viral infections; olive leaf extract, to inhibit the growth of viruses and bacteria; and sage to help dry excess mucous and disinfect the upper respiratory tract (when the steam of the tea is inhaled).

I also make sure that we all – not just the sick ones – increase our Vitamin C intake. It turns out that Linus Pauling was right all along. Increasing your intake of Vitamin C really does help strengthen the immune system (for exhaustive detail on this, visit the Linus Pauling Center Web site at <http://lpi.oregonstate.edu/infocenter>). Many experts recommend up to 10 grams a day at the first sign of a cold or flu while others suggest taking a gram or two every couple of hours to bowel tolerance. You'll most likely need to experiment to see what your reactions and tolerances are.

Don't Forget the Garlic

The next time you feel a cold coming on, another terrific standby is garlic, as it has both antiviral and immune-stimulating properties. Here's how you make the most of the "stinking rose," according to Dr. David Zeiger:

***Start early.** Chewing a garlic clove twice a day at the first sign of cold symptoms is one approach. But if you have some issues about sporting breath that only a mother could love, get supplements and start taking a capsule four times a day. Three or four days later, depending how you feel, drop the dose to three times a day until you're all better.*

Garlic comes in a number of forms, starting with the fresh clove, and also including capsules, tablets, soft gels, oil, powder, and liquid. Dr. Zeiger recommends enteric-coated capsules as they not only protect your breath, but they also make sure the all-important healing compound known as allicin is not destroyed by stomach acid. If you live in a household of garlic lovers, however, nothing beats fresh!

A Final Word

There's simply no overstating the importance of a good night's sleep. Sleep deprivation can mean more than just drowsiness in the morning - it can also lower your immune response, elevate your stress hormones, and make a bad day feel oh, so much worse.

So secure some zzz's, and get busy protecting yourself with whole, immune-enhancing foods, healing herbs and essential nutrients.

Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E., is a health and nutrition educator, a writer, and an Adjunct Professor in the Dept. of Holistic Health Studies at JFK University. She can be reached at hwaldman@turning-the-tables.com, or on the web at www.turning-the-tables.com