

## ***Immune Health***

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When most people think of the term “health,” they relate it to how well they are feeling, whether or not they are sick, or how quickly they recover from the bugs that get passed around between friends, family, and coworkers. Each of these aspects is connected, of course, to the condition of a person’s immune system. That is, if your immune system is weak or compromised, you’re more likely to feel badly, get sick more often, and take longer to recover each time you come down with a new infection.

There has been a lot of interest in immune health, and research has made some responses to illness ubiquitous: who hasn’t heard of taking vitamin C and zinc at the first sign of a cold? One link, however, that is often overlooked in its relation to the vitality of the immune system is *digestive health*: how the state of your digestive system affects your ability to stay well, fight off illness, and respond quickly to bacterial and viral infections.

If you think about it, it makes perfect sense: since your digestive system is responsible for making use of the health-promoting nutrients that you get through food and drink, if it is compromised, all the systems of the body – including the immune system – can become compromised, as well. Said another way, if your digestive system isn’t functioning optimally, you could be eating the healthiest foods in the world and still not fully benefitting from them.

Sadly, most people do not eat a balanced and varied diet, full of organic whole foods such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, seeds, legumes, and organic lean meats. The average American diet leaves much to be desired: high in fat, sugar, and refined flour, the digestive system can quickly become sluggish and unable to do its best work for your body.

So what can you do to turn the tide? Fortunately, there are some very easy ways to increase your digestive and immune health at the same time. For one thing, you can start replacing those less-nutritive foods with healthier choices. Getting plenty of dietary fiber (upwards of 25 g/day) and sufficient water to move it through your system helps sweep the intestines clean, ensuring that they can optimally interact with and get the most out of the food that passes through them.

Once your intestines are in good shape, you can boost your immunity by supplementing with antioxidants and probiotics. Antioxidants include some vitamins (such as A, C, and E), minerals (especially selenium), and phytochemicals (healthful compounds found in fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and spices).<sup>1,2</sup> When you consume foods and supplements with antioxidants in them, you effectively increase your body’s ability to deal with inflammation-causing *free radicals*, unstable molecules that damage cells and tissues in the body, compromising health and leading to any number of diseases and health complaints.<sup>3</sup> Increasing your intake of antioxidants effectively supercharges your immune system, allowing it to keep you healthy longer and more easily, and also helping you heal faster when you do get sick.

Probiotics are another important factor in both digestive and immune health. Most people don't realize it, but as much as 80% of your immune health is actually related to your gut.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, the billions of bacteria that live in your digestive system play a large role in immunity. When "unfriendly" bacteria outnumber the "friendly," you can suffer from lowered immunity, digestive disorders such as diarrhea and gas, and a number of other health concerns. Boosting levels of friendly bacteria such as the well-known *Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *Bifidobacterium bifidum* can effectively supercharge your immune system, encourage digestive health, and reduce the risk for certain infections and intestinal viruses.<sup>5,6</sup>

It's pretty clear that just about everyone gets sick at some point. The difference between "healthy" and "unhealthy" people is revealed by how quickly they get well. Beyond taking vitamin C and zinc lozenges, you can give your immune system the upper hand by eating a varied, colorful diet consisting of organic whole foods and by supplementing with antioxidants and probiotics. In this way, you'll not only improve your health when you're feeling down and out, but increase your odds of staying well once you are.

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<sup>1</sup> Antioxidants – Topic Overview. (2009). Retrieved August 6, 2011 from <http://www.webmd.com/food-recipes/tc/antioxidants-topic-overview>

<sup>2</sup> Mercola, J. (2009). Top 12 Foods for Healthy Immune Response. Retrieved August 6, 2011 from <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2009/12/08/top-12-foods-for-healthy-immune-response.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Balch P. A. (2003). *Prescription for Dietary Wellness* (2nd ed.). NY: Avery.

<sup>4</sup> Mercola, J. (2008). Probiotics Found to Help Your Gut's Immune System. Retrieved August 6, 2011 from <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2008/07/05/probiotics-found-to-help-your-gut-s-immune-system.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Probiotics and probiotics. (2009). Functional Foods Fact Sheet, *International Food Information Council Foundation*, Retrieved April 30, 2011 from [http://www.foodinsight.org/Resources/Detail.aspx?topic=Functional\\_Foods\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_Probiotics\\_and\\_Prebiotics](http://www.foodinsight.org/Resources/Detail.aspx?topic=Functional_Foods_Fact_Sheet_Probiotics_and_Prebiotics)

<sup>6</sup> Mercola, J. (2008). Probiotics Found to Help Your Gut's Immune System. Retrieved August 6, 2011 from <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2008/07/05/probiotics-found-to-help-your-gut-s-immune-system.aspx>