

Immune-boosting foods: Make these additions to your meals for a healthy lifestyle



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Ayurveda, the ancient Indian branch of natural and holistic medicine is derived from a Sanskrit word, meaning the science of life.(Unsplash)

Our immune system is the body's defence mechanism and helps protect against diseases, infections, inflammations and helps us recover after an injury. Our immunity can be solidified and enhanced by adding ayurvedic ingredients that help cleanse the body along with aiding digestion, metabolism, absorption of nutrients and more. Ayurveda consists of various healing properties through which one can build their immunity and live a healthy life.

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Stress and the immune system

Stress has a significant effect on our minds and bodies, especially our immune system. When someone undergoes a stressful situation, a series of hormones including cortisol and adrenaline are released from the adrenal gland, which help the body cope with stress. While cortisol is helpful in decreasing stress-related inflammation in the body, a prolonged exposure increases risk of other health problems namely, anxiety, depression, digestive issues, sleep disorders, cognitive ailments and more.

To keep stress at bay, meditation, yoga, fitness and healthy eating are some of the go-to solutions.

To ensure we are mindful about what we eat and how it is helping us, we need to understand the properties of these food items. Yoga expert Nimish Dayalu says, "A balanced diet of fresh fruits, raw or par-boiled vegetables, cooked vegetables, pulses, grains and curds can help in maintaining a healthy body and thereby boosting immunity."

The food we eat can be broadly categorised into Sattvik, Rajasic and Tamasic food. Sattvik Aahar or food is considered the best for the body.

“Food that is cooked more than 2 hours back should be avoided as this isn’t healthy for the body. Avoid processed food, sugary snacks and drinks, excessive alcohol, smoking and drugs. Immunity is also affected by mental stress so take steps to reduce the mental clutter and duress. Make exercising a habit and take steps to live a happier and healthier life,” Dayalu adds.

Here are some of the food items and spices that you must add to your diet to boost immunity:

Amla

Also known as Indian gooseberry, amla is used in Ayurveda usually in the form of powders, juices and chyawanprash. It helps keep issues related to digestion at bay, treats constipation and more. It has a high content of vitamin C, amino acids and minerals.

Ashwagandha

Ashwagandha is said to increase vitality, reduce fatigue and boost energy. It can be consumed in powder form, as a tablet or as a part of a concoction of other natural ingredients. The herb is also beneficial in healing joint pains and curing insomnia.

Ajwain

Ajwain contains strong digestive properties and works as a nerve stimulant. It removes toxins from the body, in turn helping weight loss and also contains healing properties that aid joint pains.

Cumin

A good digestive system and metabolism-enhancer, it helps the body in nutrient absorption.

Garlic

This staple kitchen ingredient is a powerhouse of nutrients and is known to help cure skin infections, fight bacteria, viruses, and fungi. Consumption of garlic cloves may also help lower cholesterol.

Ginger

Ginger is a great source of antioxidants and works best as an accompaniment with meals. It can be also be added to juices and stir-fried preparations.

Mushrooms

Mushrooms are a rich source of Vitamin B and the mineral selenium. Low selenium makes you prone to severe flu and riboflavin and niacin (both Vitamin B) play an important role in building a healthy immune system.

“Eating a variety of foods helps boost the immunity. Restrictive diets, unless advised to patients with a medical problem, limit the nutrients available for the body to heal and repair itself. Foods rich in vitamin C such as lemon and amla are time tested life-savers. Turmeric, a common household spice, is a powerful antioxidant and antibiotic. Mushrooms and eggs are an important source of vitamin D, which is essential not just for bone health, but overall immunity,” says Dr Jonathan DSouza, PhD. Alternative Medicine.

“Traditional medicines have always placed emphasis on eating right. Eating right means eating a variety of foods that are as close to nature. For eg, dal, rice, chapati, a cooked vegetable, pickle and papad. Reduce eating processed foods such as noodles, pasta, biscuits as they contain preservatives that may reduce your immunity. Also, make a note of foods that you might be allergic to and avoid them. A heightened allergic response might leave you susceptible to other viral infections,” he adds.

Neem leaves

Neem is one of the most-potent blood purifiers and detoxifiers in Ayurveda. While neem oil can be used for muscle and joint pains, its powdered or juice is excellent for the liver, enhances digestion, destroys excess bacteria in the intestinal region and more.

Spinach

Spinach is a superfood containing several nutrients, including folate, which helps the body make new cells and repair DNA, fibre, antioxidants such as vitamin C, and more.

Turmeric

This natural spice helps clear mucus in the respiratory tract and also helps in better digestion. Turmeric is great for both the internal and external health of the body as it aids against ailments while also helping to keep a healthy glow on the face.

Virgin Coconut Oil

“The important Medium Chain Fatty Acid (MCFA’s) present in coconut oil are Lauric acid, caprylic acid and capric acid, together they help improve the immune system of the body. Lauric acid and its monoglyceride are effective in destroying a wide variety of lipid-coated bacteria by disintegrating their lipid membranes. Monolaurin functions as an anti-virus that targets eloped viruses by dissolving the protective lipids surrounding it,” says Mumbai-based nutritionist Sheryl Salis.

“In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ayush Ministry has identified certain self-care guidelines which include oil pulling as an immune-boosting measure. Oil pulling is an ancient Ayurvedic detoxification therapy that includes swishing a spoonful of oil in the mouth for about 5 minutes. Using cold-pressed virgin coconut oil for oil pulling helps get rid of bacteria in the mouth as the technique aids in overall health and well-being,” the nutritionist adds.

Dr Partap Chauhan, Director, Jiva Ayurveda advises steering clear of fear and negativity which adversely affects the immune system.

“Maintaining hygiene is the best way to prevent infections from entering the body. Wash hands often with soap and water, use sanitizers, cover nose while sneezing, and avoid visiting busy and crowded places. Performing agnihotra/ yagya or burning havan samagri (a mixture of herbs) keeps home and environment free from germs,” says Dr Chauhan.

“Eating a tablespoonful of Chyawanprash daily enhances immunity, specifically that of lungs and respiratory system. Amalaki or Amala (*Emblica officinalis*), Guduchi/Glioy (*Tinaspora cordifolia*), Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), Kutki (*Picrorhiza kurroa*), Tulsi (holy basil) are some of the Ayurvedic herbs that are helpful in building the immunity and preventing the infection,” Dr Chauhan adds.

A mixture or kadha made of fennel, cumin, coriander powder and fresh grated ginger is also helpful in keeping the body free of ailments, according to Dr Chauhan.