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Eat Vegan to Boost Your Immune System

21 Jul 2014 by [Saravanan R](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

We all know a strong immune system is needed for optimum health and wellbeing, but not everyone understands the connection between our eating habits and our immune systems. Fatty foods, refined and processed foods all weaken the immune system, while whole, plant-based foods strengthen it.

Made up of a complex network of cells and organs, the immune system is the body's natural defense mechanism, protecting it from infections, illnesses, viruses, bacteria, fungi, parasites, cancer cells and toxins. The organs involved in the immune system are called lymphoid organs which include adenoids, appendix, blood vessels, bone marrow, lymph nodes, lymphatic vessels, peyer's patches, spleen, thymus gland and tonsils.

Your immune system is only as strong as the food you use to fuel it. Studies discovered that macrophages, a type of immune cells, slowed down in people with a high cholesterol level. Cholesterol is chiefly found in animal based foods. For healthy immune system functioning, animal-based foods should be eliminated and replaced with plant-based ones. The easiest way to do that is to switch to a vegan diet full of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Besides animal-based foods, refined foods, refined sugar and processed foods also deplete the body's vital nutrients and thereby weaken the immune system. Ingredients in processed foods such as MSG (Monosodium glutamate), sodium nitrates and nitrites, artificial sweeteners, and artificial colors diminish the body's vital nutrients and depress the immune system. Caffeine, alcohol and smoking terribly weaken the immune system as well.

By avoiding these unhealthy foods and stimulants, you can reduce unwanted stress on your immune system. By changing from an unhealthy diet to a nutrient dense one, you can better maintain the strength and health of your immune system. Micronutrients such as vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals, found in fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains, are essential for the healthy functioning of the immune system.

This easy reference list will show new vegans where to start and seasoned vegans how to increase the positive impact of their already healthful lifestyle:

Vitamins

Beta carotene- A precursor to Vitamin A that neutralizes free radicals. Beta carotene increases the number of infection fighting cells and helper T cells. Spinach, cilantro, carrots, sweet potatoes have plenty of Beta carotene.



Vitamin B2 (Riboflavin)- Helps strengthen the immune system. This vitamin is found in green leafy vegetables, whole grains and yeast.

Vitamin B5 (Pantothenic acid)- Improves the body's natural resistance and is found in nuts and whole grains.

Vitamin B6 (Pyridoxine)- Helps in the production of antibodies which aid in fighting diseases. Bananas, green leafy vegetables, carrots, peas and wheat germ are rich sources of this vitamin.

Vitamin B12- Believed to have a positive role in immune functions. This vitamin can be obtained from B12 supplements or fortified soy/ almond/hemp milk & cereals. It is *crucial* for vegans to make sure that they get an adequate amount of B12.

Vitamin C- A potent antioxidant and immune booster, vitamin C enhances the function of immune cells and offers protection from infection. This vitamin is richly found in citrus fruits like lemon, sweet lime, orange, berries like Indian gooseberry, strawberry, goji berry, as well as in melons, peas and sweet potatoes.



Vitamin D- Recent research shows that Vitamin D is essential for activating the immune system. Vitamin D is naturally produced in the skin on exposure to sunlight. At least fifteen to twenty minutes of daily sunlight exposure would help you obtain the needed amount of Vitamin D.

Vitamin E- An antioxidant that aids in the production of antibodies. Studies reveal that people with low serum Vitamin E levels are more prone to infections. Greens, whole grains and almonds are good sources of this vitamin.



Minerals

Copper- Essential for immune function. Sunflower seeds, peanuts, mushrooms and prunes all contain copper.

Iron- Needed for white blood cell formation. Foods rich in iron are lentils, beets, greens, bitter melon and dry fruits.

Selenium- Being a potent antioxidant, it protects the body from diseases by activating antioxidant enzymes. Foods that supply selenium are fruits, vegetables, walnuts and sunflower seeds.



Phytonutrients

Phytonutrients enhance the number of immune cells, thereby benefitting the overall immune system. These phytonutrients are plant based nutrients which give fruits, vegetables, greens, legumes and grains their colors and flavors. The best way to get these phytonutrients is to eat many colorful fruits, vegetables and greens every day.



Omega 3 fatty acids

Though animal fats are harmful for the immune system, Omega 3 fats, the healthy fats found in walnuts, flax seeds, sesame seeds and salba/chia seeds, are not. They benefit the immune system by increasing the activity of phagocytes, a type of white blood cells.



Probiotics

The friendly and beneficial bacteria found in your gut can boost your immune system too by increasing the activity of natural killer cells. Probiotics can be obtained from soy yogurt, peanut curd and other fermented foods like rejuvelac, coconut kefir etc.

For even more information about eating for your immune system, check out Dr. Joel Fuhrman's book *[Super Immunity](#)*. In it, he recommends eating large quantities of plant-based foods for superior nutrition. The super immunity diet should include a large salad everyday, half a cup of beans or legumes, three fresh fruits and one ounce of raw nuts/seeds and a large serving of steamed vegetables everyday.

Apart from eating healthier, adequate water intake, sunlight exposure, exercise and adequate rest and relaxation will all bolster the immune system.

About the author:

Dr. R. Saravanan is a qualified homeopath who has a passion for holistic health. His personal healing journey led him to explore holistic nutrition. He has received special training in nutrition-based disease reversal from SHARAN. Currently he is serving as a health advisor with SHARAN (www.sharan-india.org). He has contributed a section in the best life-changing book *[Rethink Food](#)*, which was recently published.