

Five Essential Nutrients for Winter Health

While the winter's wind, rain, and snow can curtail many of our activities ... germs and viruses are still floating around and making us sick regardless of the weather! In fact, it sometimes seems as if the invisible nuisances truly thrive during the wet, chilly months, "brewing up" an endless assortment of colds, coughs, sniffles, sore throats, and all of the other related miseries that accompany these ailments. Consider, though, that our wintertime vulnerability to colds and flu may not lie so much with these malevolent microbes and virulent viruses (they're around most of the time anyway) as it does in the change of lifestyle that winter often brings.

For example, during these next few months, we tend to spend more time indoors (all too often in hot, stuffy rooms), and, when we do leave our closed-up and heated homes for the frigid outdoors, we give our systems a resounding shock. Winter stresses like this tend to use up the body's supply of vitamin C at a rapid rate, and ironically, many fresh fruits and vegetables, (our best source of vitamin C), are often so expensive and in short supply during the cold part of the year that generally most folks actually reduce their intake of such important foods when they most need them!

During the winter months many people also seem to turn to sweeter and/or starchier diets. Also, since more time is devoted to games, reading, and other indoor leisure pursuits at this time, we have a tendency to snack more. This can create a deficiency in the minerals our bodies need for the breakdown and metabolism of the nutritious foods we do eat from essential enzymes. Furthermore, the older we get, the more we have to rely on enzymes in our *diets* ... rather than the supply their bodies produce, but enzymes are generally destroyed when they encounter any heat higher than body temperature and since we eat more cooked foods in winter—it's no wonder a "cold season" seems to occur during the chilly months.

So, for optimum winter health, we need to give special consideration to our intake of certain vitamins and minerals, to help prevent us from susceptibility to 'winter bugs' and related illnesses. Each of the following plays an important role in strengthening the immune system and boosting energy levels, whilst also restoring vitality and even improving your complexion!

Vitamin A

Vitamin A (Retinol) is not a vitamin that gets much publicity, but is important for repairing tissues needed for growth and development. It is also essential for strengthening the immune system, shortening illness and infections, and maintaining good eyesight. It also strengthens the delicate outer membranes of the nose, throat, digestive tract and lungs. These membranes are the first line of defence against attack from the outside. It's also vital for the healthy membranes of the eyes, ears and reproductive organs as well as healthy skin, gums and the prevention of recurrent infections (including thrush and cystitis). Common signs relating to vitamin A deficiency are dry flaky, cracked or thickened skin, skin pigmentation and skin problems in general, mouth ulcers, poor night vision, frequent colds, viruses or infections, dandruff, anaemia that persists despite taking iron supplements, thyroid disorders, dry eyes, inflammatory diseases affecting the intestines such as Coeliac disease and even gluten sensitivity.

Main food sources are: The important fact to remember is that “vitamin A proper” (retinol) is only found in animal derived food (richest sources) like cheese, egg yolk, live yoghurt, oily fish (mackerel, sardines, salmon) and liver. Its cousin, beta carotene (also rich in antioxidants) is found in plant foods, particularly orange and yellow fruits and vegetables (squashes, carrots, beetroot, peppers, oranges, apricots, mangoes, tomatoes, goji berries) and green vegetables (kale, cabbage, broccoli, sprouts, spinach). *NOTE: Vegetarians and vegans who rely on beta-carotene from fruit and vegetable sources, should serve them with fat (extra-virgin olive oil, flax seed oil, coconut oil, hemp oil) to ensure proper absorption.*

Good herb sources are: Common mallow leaves (*malva sylvestris*), green tea, peppermint, chillies, rose hips, parsley, raspberry leaf, nettles, dandelion root, chlorella, spirulina, barley grass and alfalfa grass.

Vitamin C

Contrary to popular belief, Vitamin C doesn't prevent colds and flu, but it can reduce the length and severity of symptoms. Vitamin C is a powerful antioxidant, which means it protects the body against disease. It is also vital for the production of collagen, used to build body tissue and strong bones and ward off premature ageing. It is readily available in many raw, fresh fruits and vegetables.

Main food sources are: Citrus fruits - lemons and limes (when ingested) are especially alkaline too, (cleansing through the lymphatic system and thereby boosting the immune system), kiwi fruit, tomatoes, guava, papaya, pineapple and berries - (especially strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, goji berries and cranberries) are all an excellent source of vitamin C. Green vegetables (kale, spinach, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, asparagus, peas and beans), all peppers, onions and sweet potatoes all contain high levels. Pumpkin seeds are very high too.

Good herb sources are: Dandelion leaves, yellow dock leaves, common mallow leaves (*malva sylvestris*), rose hips, raspberry leaves, red clover flowers, horseradish, garlic, ginger, elder (berries), turmeric, nettles, chlorella, barley & alfalfa grasses.

If you eat a wide range of fresh fruit, herbs and vegetables daily you will have a balanced intake of vitamin C.

Vitamin D

Known as the "sunshine" vitamin", it is only synthesised by the body from direct exposure of bare skin to sunlight, so if you spend considerable time indoors, or when sunshine is limited during the winter for most people, your body may well be short on vitamin D. The more skin you expose, the more sunlight you create and it can depend on where you live and the time you spend in the sun and of course with the increased use of high SPF factors, advice to cover up and the fact that we are not overwhelmed with sunshine in the UK, mean we are generally not obtaining adequate vitamin D by this means. Vitamin D is necessary for Calcium and Phosphorus absorption in the body, supporting growth and development of bones and teeth in children, the prevention of muscle weakness, the normal regulation of heartbeat, as well as boosting the immune system. *NOTE: it can be difficult to get a good amount of Vitamin D from food, so supplementation of D3 is recommended in those cases.*

Main food sources are: It is present in only limited quantities in most ordinary foods, with the exception of such "primary sources" as egg yolks, fortified milk products, and unrefined oils. If you avoid consuming milk and eggs (items that are often kept out of people's diets for many reasons), your body may be short on D.

Good herb sources are: A good way to get natural Vitamin D is through green foods. Foods become green because of Chlorophyll, which is a green pigment present in all green plants and is responsible for the absorption of light. This provides the energy for photosynthesis. So, it is naturally present in parsley, nettles, alfalfa grass, blue-green algae, chlorella and horsetail.

Selenium

Selenium is an essential mineral that makes up part of the enzymes which defend the body against damage. As an antioxidant, it strengthens the immune system and is also thought to protect against cancer, especially of the prostate.

Main food sources are: Whole grains (corn, wheat, rye, quinoa, barley, rice, oats), soya beans, most meat (pork, ham, beef, lamb, poultry), fresh and saltwater fish (mackerel, tuna, swordfish, halibut, herring), oysters and other shellfish (lobster, clams, mussels, prawns), eggs, red grapes, mushrooms, sunflower, flax, sesame and pumpkin seeds, raisins, cashews, walnuts and brazil nuts.

Good herb sources are: Hibiscus flowers, rose hips, nettles, raspberry leaf, peppermint, chamomile, oat straw, burdock root, lemon grass, yarrow, garlic, cayenne, alfalfa grass. .

Zinc

Zinc is absolutely vital for a healthy immune system, particularly in producing immune cells. Stress, alcohol and pollution deplete zinc levels and a very high fibre diet is likely to interfere with the way our bodies absorb this important mineral. A poor sense of taste or smell, reduced appetite, frequent infections and white spots on the nails may be signs of zinc deficiency. *NOTE: low zinc levels will also predispose to low vitamin A since these two nutrients work together.*

Main food sources are: Zinc is not found widely in foods apart from meat such as beef, lamb, chicken and seafood (oysters, crab, lobster). The best vegetarian sources are pumpkin, sunflower and flax seeds, pecan nuts, pine nuts, cashews, oats, rye, bilberries, spinach, beans and pulses, mushrooms.

Good herb sources are: Nettles, spirulina, barley grass, chlorella, chervil, parsley, coriander, ginger, celery seed, thyme, turmeric, skullcap, sage, spirulina, echinacea root.

A few extra natural health tips:

- Reduce stress (mental, emotional or physical) in your life wherever possible, as it reduces the body's immune responses.
- Reduce your sugar intake (especially white sugar in processed foods), as it reduces your immune system by almost half!
- Increase your fresh air intake daily to re-oxygenate every cell in your body. So you could go for brisk walks outside, do more exercise (encourages

deeper breathing) or keep your windows open. Both Tai Chi and meditation have been proven to increase T cell count (important powerful immune cells).

- Increase your intake of raw, fresh, organic fruit and vegetables.
- Laugh more – it's been scientifically proven that being in a happier state of mind can actually boost your immune system due to the release of certain 'mood-enhancing' chemicals in the body.
- Both skin brushing (with a loofah or skin brush) and hot and cold showers or saunas can stimulate your lymphatic system, thereby encouraging increased white blood (immune) cells to fight off viruses and infection. Always brush towards the heart (feet up and neck down).

Fortunately, by following the suggested natural health tips and taking all above mentioned essential nutrients, (which can be easily obtained in a carefully planned winter diet like the salad recipes or through the use of well-balanced vitamin and mineral supplements), if ingested on a regular basis can do a great deal to stave off or at least minimize the miseries that winter or a change in seasons often brings.

As raw food is the best 'live' and power packed source to boost the immune system, and yet at this time of year we don't exactly crave a big pile of lettuce - we want a heartier salad - one with a little more texture, more colour, and a lot of flavour! So, I have included a few recipes for some tasty immune boosting raw dishes to inspire you! But best of all, after eating any of these salads, you'll feel amazing. They're jam-packed with vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants - and healthy fats that will leave you satisfied, but not stuffed, and loads of energy... and you won't even miss the lettuce!

Quinoa Salad with Butternut Squash, Spinach & Red Onion

1 medium, cubed butternut squash
1 small red onion, halved and thinly sliced
2 tablespoons olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste
1/4 tsp. Cayenne pepper
1 bag baby spinach
1/2 cup dried goji berries
1 cup cooked quinoa grain

Roast the squash in the oven drizzled with a tablespoon of the olive oil, and seasoned with salt, pepper and the cayenne until tender. Cool slightly. In a large bowl combine the squash, onion, spinach, dried goji berries, quinoa, and the remaining tablespoon of olive oil and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve warm or at room temperature. *NOTE: This is really delicious with toasted pine nuts!*

Shredded Brussel Sprouts, Red Cabbage, Carrot & Pine Nut 'Slaw'

300g Brussels sprouts, shredded
500g red cabbage, shredded
2-3 carrots, grated
1/2 cup dried cranberries
1/4 cup toasted pine nuts
2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
1 1/2 tablespoons honey
3 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

In a large bowl, combine the Brussels sprouts, carrots and the cabbage with the dried cranberries and toasted pine nuts. To make the dressing: whisk together the Dijon mustard, honey, and cider vinegar. Add the olive oil in a steady stream, whisking constantly until combined to make a 'mayonnaise-like' consistency, and season with salt and pepper. Pour the dressing over the slaw and toss well to combine.

Roasted Winter Vegetable Salad with Kale & Pomegranate Seeds

Your choice of winter vegetables: winter squash (acorn, butternut), carrots, parsnips, sweet potatoes, peppers

5-6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 bunch curly kale
2 tablespoons pomegranate seeds
2 tablespoons toasted pine nuts
2 tablespoons Balsamic vinegar
Salt and pepper to taste
Parmesan shavings for garnish, if desired

Preheat the oven to 425°F. Peel (if not organic), cut and roast your vegetables the olive oil. Cool gently and serve when warm. While the veggies are baking, prepare the other ingredients. Rinse the kale, remove the stems, and cut into bite-size pieces. To make the dressing: whisk the Balsamic vinegar with about 4 tablespoons of olive oil in a small bowl and season with salt and pepper to taste. Add to the kale and toss lightly. Assemble the salad by arranging the vegetables on a large platter, and drizzle with the remaining vinaigrette. Layer with the kale and sprinkle with pomegranate seeds, pine nuts, and Parmesan shavings (use a vegetable peeler and a chunk of Parmesan).

Smoked Mackerel & Horseradish Salad with Beetroot, Spinach & Pumpkin Seeds

Smoked mackerel fillets, warmed and broken up into pieces
1 tablespoon of grated horseradish root (or creamed if you can't get fresh)
2-3 grated raw beetroot
1-2 handfuls of fresh baby spinach leaves
2 tablespoons Pumpkin seeds
Extra-virgin olive oil
Juice of 1 lemon

Rinse and arrange the spinach leaves in a bowl. Grate or thinly slice the beetroot and together with the pumpkin seeds and warmed mackerel fillet pieces, add to the leaves and mix well. To make the dressing: Mix together the oil, lemon juice, horseradish and salt and pepper to taste. Drizzle over the salad and toss lightly.

Wishing you well this Winter Season!