Eating away at colds and flu

Cold and flu viruses are a sneaky bunch: hiding in the shadows, looking for the perfect moment to drive you —coughing and sniffling—into the comfort of your bed. Fortunately, staying healthy and boosting your immune system can be as simple as taking a short trip to your fridge. By eating well and chowing down on the foods below, you might ward off pesky viruses during the height of cold and flu season.



Garlic. Eating raw garlic has the same effect on cold viruses as it does on potential dates: it keeps them away. That's because it contains a number of chemical properties that help boost the immune system. For those who like the idea, but not the taste of raw garlic, odorless concentrated garlic pills are a good alternative and are available at most health food stores.

Vitamin C-rich foods. To its many supporters, Vitamin C is like a superhero component of cold-fighting foods, known for potentially reducing the severity and length of colds should you catch one. Medical experts have yet to conclusively prove some Vitamin C claims, however, many agree that 200mg a day—roughly five servings of oranges, grapefruits, red peppers, tomatoes or other Vitamin C-rich fruits and vegetables—can help strengthen the immune system.

Whole grains. If there's one mineral that could take the prize for "most valuable cold-fighter," it would be zinc. This nutrient, found in beef, chicken, oatmeal and other whole grains, actually increases the number of white blood cells in your body, which in turn helps to destroy cold and flu-causing viruses.

Fluids. Okay, so drinks are technically not food, but they are equally important. Think about that craving for water you have during a hard workout. Fighting a virus is just as exhausting: and your body needs to stay hydrated to win the battle. That means drinking plenty of fluids, including water, tea and unsweetened fruit juices.

Chicken soup. If your mother or relative plied you with chicken soup every time you sniffled, send a thank you card when you get a chance. Medical researchers have discovered that the chemical compounds in chicken soup can actually reduce the runny nose, swollen head and sneezing associated with colds and flu. Vegetables commonly added to soup—such as carrots and parsley—also contain nutrients that help fight infections. And if you don't have anyone to make you any, don't despair: according to the studies, canned chicken soup has the same effect as mom's does.

Leafy greens. You know green vegetables are good for you; most food guides recommend five to 10 servings of vegetables and fruits a day. And yet that spinach you bought last week is probably sitting alone, unloved, at the back of your fridge. Well here's another reason to take it out: in addition to beef and other red meat offering an excellent source of iron, you can also load up on iron by eating green vegetables such as kale and spinach. The iron in leafy greens is even more effective when eaten in combination with Vitamin C.

Yogurt. Many people think that having dairy products when suffering from a cold increases the amount of mucus the body produces, but scientists have yet to find any truth to this belief. In fact the opposite is sometimes true: yogurt contains live bacterial cultures that play a part in warding off cold viruses.

Using food to build your immune system and stay healthy is not a new idea. Everyone's grandmother or aunt knew of some "secret food" that could spring people back to perfect health. What's different now? The medical world has gotten into the act, with researchers diligently studying the healing and protective benefits of healthy eating on the body's immune system.