

Immunity

A weakened immune system leaves the body vulnerable to virtually every type of illness and disease, especially when the seasonal shift from the late summer to autumn is marked by the arrival of a new generation of viruses causing coughs and colds.

Although the immune system can recognise viral strains it has encountered and beaten off before, it will not recognise a virus that has mutated. Even the smallest genetic change will trick it into thinking a brand new species, for which it has no antibodies, has landed - and while a strong immune system will cope with this attack, one that has been weakened by poor nutrition and too much stress will struggle to get you back to good health.

Fatigue, lethargy, repeated infections, slow wound healing, allergies, thrush, colds and flu are all signs that the body's immune system is functioning below par. A healthy adult, for example, should suffer no more than two colds a year - so if you do succumb more to every passing infection, you definitely need to start supporting your immune system.

Almost everyone has now heard of the best-selling herbal remedy **echinacea**, which is prescribed in Germany by doctors and pharmacists to help fight colds and flu. It is effective, as long as you don't overuse it, but I find another less glamorous herb even more effective. **Goldenseal**, which was once used to treat syphilis and gonorrhoea, was first discovered by the Aborigine healers in Australia. It will not only help prevent an infection if you are feeling low, but can reduce the inflammation of mucous membranes once you have a cough or cold.

Most people will also reach for the **vitamin C** tablets at the first sign of a splutter. A quarter of a century ago the US Nobel Laureate, Linus Pauling, caused an outcry among medics by claiming that this nutrient, taken in high enough doses, could alleviate the symptoms of the common cold. This debate continues - however, what we do now know is that many of the symptoms of a cold have nothing to do with the cold virus itself, but are caused by the body's own immune response to that alien invader and it is this secondary problem that vitamin C can help counter.

What happens is that during a cold, the mucous membranes that line the nose become charged with the white blood cells that release large amounts of chemicals designed to destroy the virus. Unfortunately, these substances also attack the cells of the mucous membranes themselves, causing a runny nose and other disturbances. So the idea behind giving antioxidants such as **vitamins C, A and E** to tackle a cold is two-fold. Firstly, these nutrients have now been shown to support the immune system but, just as importantly, they weaken the immune attack on the body's own tissues.

Poor nutrition is the most common cause of a weakened immune response. Foods that are good natural sources of the immune-boosting antioxidants include **kiwi fruit**, which contain more vitamin C than oranges; **chinese cabbage**, which is an excellent source of vitamin A; **avocado**, known as nature's own super-food because it provides the optimum healthy ratio of fat, carbohydrate, protein and vitamin E. Foods that are rich in **vitamin B6**, which boost the production of antibodies to fight infection, will also help. These include **bananas, carrots, lentils, tuna, salmon, wholegrain flour**, and **sunflower seeds**. You also need to step up your intake of dietary **zinc** by eating more **seafood, eggs, turkey, pumpkin seeds**, and **crabmeat**.

One of the more exotic immune-boosting supplements to get noticed in the West is the **maitake mushroom**, which grows to the size of a basketball deep in the mountains of North-eastern Japan. Highly prized for its immune-boosting properties, it has been shown to stimulate the immune response by activating the T-cells which are the body's own defence against viruses and cancer cells. Recent animal studies revealed that combining maitake extract with chemotherapy treatment resulted in a 99% tumour shrinkage in just 14 days. Studies in the US, Japan and the UK have also shown that giving maitake extract to HIV patients can help protect the body's disease-fighting T-

cells which the HIV virus normally destroys.

The **kombucha** or Manchurian 'mushroom' is also now widely used to boost immunity. The name, though, is misleading because it is not a mushroom at all but a large, flat, pancake-shaped fungus-like growth that is a combination of health-promoting lichen, beneficial bacteria, and yeast that has long been used in Asia as a natural energy booster.

It is not eaten, but brewed into a strong antiviral and antibacterial tea after it has been left to ferment for a week or so in a mixture of water, sugar, apple cider vinegar, and green or black tea. Now widely used to help fight immune-related diseases such as Chronic Fatigue and Multiple Sclerosis, (MS), some devotees claim it can even help reverse the ageing process.

How to beat a cold & boost immunity

Goldenseal: It tastes vile and will stain your fingers bright yellow, but Goldenseal is highly effective. Take in liquid or capsule form. If you prefer liquid, you can buy 100ml of wild-crafted goldenseal (this simply means it is harvested naturally from the wild, not cultivated) for £11.95. **Solgar** makes goldenseal capsules. These cost £16.15 for 60 capsules. Take 1-3 every day. You can mail order both these products from **Farnacia** (0171-831 0830).

Note: Do not self-dose with this herb if you are pregnant or have high blood pressure.

Antioxidants: The body cannot store vitamin C but must rely on your dietary intake. To prevent winter infections, take 1,000mg a day. To boost the immune system and ward off colds, you'll find it hard to beat a product called **Well-max** by **Country Life**, which combines all the antioxidants, plus antibacterial grapeseed extract, goldenseal, Siberian ginseng, astragalus, schizandra, shi'take and reishi mushrooms, plus bee propolis, garlic, echinacea, and the liver-supporting herb, Pau d'arco. 30 tablets cost £9.95. Mail order from **Revital** (0800-252875) and add £1.50 p&p.

Magic Mushrooms: **Revital** (0800-252875) has also sourced immune-boosting maitake mushroom tablets. 30 x 600mg tablets cost £15.49. Take two tablets, three times a day.

Kombucha Tea: **The Kombucha Tea Network (UK)** can get you started with a handbook and starter culture, which costs £14.95 plus £1.50 p&p. Call 01225-833150 for more details or send a large sae to **The Kombucha Tea Network (UK), PO Box 1887, Bath BA2 8YA.**

Echinacea: To prevent a cold, take 20 drops of echinacea, twice a day for 6-8 weeks then stop. At the onset of symptoms, take 20 drops four times a day for 10-14 days and stop. **Bioforce** echinacea tincture costs £5.99 for 50ml and is available from all good health stores.