

Winter Nutrition: Help Patients Boost Immune Health & Keep the Body in Balance

DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

As we progress through the winter season, it is extremely common to see patients asking about immune-system remedies for treating / avoiding seasonal issues such as cold and flu. It is not uncommon to have patients arrive at my office with bags overflowing with bottles of vitamin supplements / herbal remedies, confused about what pills to take.

One of my main clinical goals is to teach all patients to see food as medicine and embrace healthy foods instead of amassing a huge collection of vitamin supplements. If I can replace a bottle of vitamins with food sources of nutrients, I consider it a clinical success. Here are some basic suggestions for food sources of nutrients that can help boost immune health and keep the body in balance as the cold months of winter phase into early spring.

When discussing nutrition with patients, I always combine the energetics of Chinese medicine with basic nutrition science, allowing patients to understand food in a much broader context - which hopefully inspires and informs. One of the most fundamental concepts within a clinical context concerning nutrition is to get patients excited and inspired about seeing food as a key factor for immunity, rather than seeking the next "miracle-in-a-bottle." The following foods are ones I recommend for patients seeking improved immunity during the winter season.

Walnuts

In Chinese medicine, walnuts or *He Tao Ren* are warm and sweet, and enter the lung, kidney and large intestine channels. The properties and actions include tonifying, assisting the kidneys in grasping *qi*, warming kidney yang, and mild laxative / moistening qualities. Nutritional research shows that walnuts are rich in fatty acids, vitamins and minerals.

Nourishing the kidneys is a key factor for health and immunity during the winter months, and walnuts are an extremely convenient and easy-to-use food to accomplish this. Walnuts can be easily added to salads, Greek yogurt and oatmeal, as well as soups. Patients can also simply eat a handful daily as a snack.

I particularly recommend walnuts to patients who have a history of kidney vacuity issues and Lung vacuity issues. In such cases, I recommend making a mix of walnuts and goji berries, and adding it to soups, Greek yogurt, oatmeal, salads, or for use as a snack. Walnuts are also an excellent aid for yin vacuity / overall dryness during the winter months, caused by frequent exposure to interior heating.

Sunflower Seeds

Sunflower seeds are another nutrient-dense food that can be easily added to salads, soups, Greek yogurt or as a snack. Sunflower seeds are especially rich in vitamins / minerals, particularly zinc, magnesium, selenium, vitamin E, and B vitamins. These nutrients are helpful during times of stress

and provide important nourishment to the immune system.

The combination of walnuts and sunflower seeds as a snack is an excellent combination for sources of substantial amounts of vitamins, minerals, healthy fats and phytonutrients.

Fresh Garlic

In Chinese medicine, garlic or *Da Suan* is attributed a pungent taste and warm nature, and acts upon the spleen, stomach, and lung channels. Its actions include promoting the circulation of *qi* and blood, eliminating toxic substances, destroying parasites, as well as supporting cardiovascular / respiratory health.

Garlic is an extremely researched food in Western science and can be found in a wide array of forms, including dried as a spice and in tablets / capsules as a nutritional supplement. I always recommend the use of fresh garlic, as in this form more active compounds are available for support of the immune system including antiviral, antifungal and antibacterial actions.

Garlic is an exceptional food to have on hand to manage early stages of wind-cold invasions, as well as recalcitrant respiratory issues. I always suggest consuming fresh garlic with food, ideally chopped and allowed to sit for 5-10 minutes before sprinkling on food. Once chopped, fresh garlic can easily be added to soups, simple pasta dishes, or with olive oil on toasted breads.

An extremely effective combination for immune health during the winter / spring seasons is pasta or soup with fresh garlic / oregano. Oregano can be used as a spice or in liquid form, and garlic should ideally be fresh and added after the meal has been prepared. I always encourage patients to have fresh garlic and oregano on hand during the winter months and to use liberally with warm foods. Fresh garlic and oregano can of course also be added to salads.

Ginger

Ginger is one of the most versatile foods to have on hand during the winter / spring months. Ginger can be used fresh in salads, soups, or as a simple tea. Ginger can also be used in dried form in capsules or added to soups. This versatile herb is warming and acts specifically upon the spleen, stomach and lung channels.

The simple use of ginger tea daily during the winter / spring months can be a powerful way to boost digestion and stimulate warming circulation. For conditions of excess mucus and cold signs, ginger, oregano, and fresh garlic can be a perfect combination in soup form to clear and balance the gastric / respiratory system.

Soups / Stews

The use of soups / stews during the cold winter / spring months is by far the most efficient manner for consuming an ample amount of immune-boosting foods. Patients can add a wide array of immune- / Spleen-boosting spices and vitamin- / mineral-rich vegetables to soups; and bone broth can also be added to boost the nutritional content and help target the spleen and chronic digestive challenges.

I often find that for many patients, using soups / stews is the most foundational step to improving the diet and increasing consumption of vegetables and spices, which are often lacking.

Clinical Takeaway

I hope this discussion of convenient foods and herbs to recommend during the winter / spring months inspires readers to help patients begin to see "food as medicine." The next time a patient brings in a bag full of bottles of vitamins and "immune formulas," think of this article and create your own handouts focusing on the power of food to heal and nourish.

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