

# Supporting Your Immune System

In the current emerging health crisis, you might be wondering what you can do to support your own, and your family's immune system.

There is a lot of information out there and everybody seems to have their own ideas – so how do we find fact from fiction?

Below we separate some of the myths from the facts and look at some practical tips to help you look after yours and your family's health as best you can.

## **What Probably Doesn't Work** (insufficient evidence)

Steer clear of any product or single food that claims to be able to be a magic bullet to boosting your immune system. The idea that the immune system is something that can be easily influenced seems doubtful when you realise how complex a system it really is. Hundreds of different types of cells are doing a variety of jobs from identifying invaders, carrying messages, devouring unfriendly bacteria to learning how to fight new enemies.

There's still a huge amount that we don't understand about how this complex system works and so when we're told that something will 'boost' it, unless you are happy to go with anecdotal evidence look at the science before spending your money.

## **What Works** (strong evidence)

Try to follow general guidelines for good-health to naturally keep your immune system working as it should do. Every part of your body, including your immune system, works better when supported by healthy-living strategies and protected from assaults such as smoking, drinking high amounts of alcohol or stress and lack of sleep.

Focus on: eating a balanced diet; staying active; getting fresh air whenever possible; trying to sleep well and limiting alcohol.

Look after your gut. There is no doubt that the microbiome – the trillions of different microbes that flourish in the gut – plays an important part in overall health and immunity. However, there is just not the evidence to point to any probiotic supplement as having a beneficial effect on the immune system. Rather than take a supplement, better to consume foods naturally rich in a variety of strains of probiotics such as kefir, yoghurt, sauerkraut, kombucha and sourdough bread. You can further positively influence the diversity of your microbiome by eating a wide variety of vegetables, fruits and wholegrains.

For more information on a balanced diet and foods that provide nutrients thought to be important for the immune system to work normally check out the following link

<https://www.nutrition.org.uk/healthyliving/helpingyoueatwell.html>

## **Should I Take a Vitamin and Mineral Supplement?**

There are a number of nutrients that are important for the immune system to work normally. For example, **iron** helps to maintain healthy immune cells, whilst **zinc** plays a role in developing natural killer cells to help fight viruses.

If you are eating a balanced diet of vegetables and fruits, wholegrains, protein, fats, dairy (or plant alternatives), this will provide you with vitamins that are important for the immune system (e.g.

vitamin A, B6, B12 C and D) and minerals (e.g. zinc, selenium and iron). For most of the general population therefore it should not be necessary to take a vitamin and mineral supplement, with the exception of vitamin D.

Vitamin D contributes to the normal functioning of the immune system. As said, whilst we can get most of the vitamins and minerals we need from our diet, Vitamin D is a bit different as it is only found in a small number of foods (for example oily fish, eggs, fortified margarines and some fortified breakfast cereals). One in five adults in the UK population have low vitamin D status.

The body creates vitamin D from direct sunlight on the skin when outdoors. Under normal circumstances, from about late March/early April to the end of September, most people should be able to get all the vitamin D they need from sunlight. However, with recommendations for **self-isolation**, it may be difficult to get outdoors, and The Department of Health recommends that if you aren't often outdoors you should take a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms of vitamin D throughout the year.

If you are worried that during the coronavirus outbreak, you may not be able to follow a healthy, balanced diet for any reason, then a general vitamin and mineral supplement might act as a “safety net”. Own Brand Pharmacy and Supermarket multivitamin and mineral supplements can be purchased – there is no need to buy more expensive branded supplements. Look for one containing minerals such as zinc, selenium and iron, as well as vitamins.

The Department of Health also recommends that all children aged 6 months to 5 years should be given vitamin supplements containing vitamins A, C and D every day (unless they are having more than 500ml a day of fortified infant formula).

Under the [Healthy Start scheme](#), eligible families can get free vouchers every week to spend on milk and plain fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables. You can also get free vitamins. If you live in Scotland visit <https://www.mygov.scot/best-start-grant-best-start-foods/>

So whilst vitamin and mineral supplements can help if you're deficient in something specific; for most of us, if you're eating a healthy balanced diet; staying active; getting fresh air whenever possible; trying to sleep well and limiting alcohol, then you are taking the right steps to keep your immune system in good shape.