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ON guard

Sometimes it's worth turning to vitamin supplements to help ward off winter bugs. By **Julia Nekich**.

Eating healthily not only provides our bodies with essential nutrients to keep them running at an optimal level, it also helps to keep our immune systems strong.

A healthy immune system can more effectively ward off colds and viruses. But at times, we may need to strengthen our immune systems with vitamin and mineral supplements and herbs.

Naturopath Dr Karen Bridgman, from Pymble Grove Health Centre and Australian

Biologics, and a lecturer in herbal medicine at the University of Sydney, says: "These days, unless you are regularly eating organic or biodynamically grown food, it's difficult to get all the nutrients needed from foods. Our soils are generally low in minerals, and storing and processing food depletes nutrients."

Our lifestyles can cause nutrient depletion, too. "Sugar, coffee, alcohol and cigarettes are often called 'nutrient robbers', because they don't contain enough nutrients to be metabolised, so they take nutrients from other bodily stores," says Dr Bridgman.

WINTER'S EFFECTS

In winter, our bodies are pummelled with colds, viruses and other bugs. "Two major factors contribute to a person's chances of becoming infected with viruses or bacteria: the virulence of the bug and a person's immune status," Dr Bridgman says.

It's mainly through hand contact and rubbing our faces that bugs are spread. But Ruth Kendon, a leading naturopath and herbalist who has helped design supplements for Australia's complementary medicine industry, has seen many people succumb to illness only at the end of winter.

"One reason is that they have let their resistance slide – they haven't been looking after themselves during winter. In winter, people generally eat foods that are starchier, more refined and contain more sugar and fat," she says.

Naturopath Karen Martin, from Adelaide's Australian Centre for Natural Health and Wellness, and president of the Australian Naturopathic Practitioners Association, says there's a reason for our attraction to poor-quality foods in winter.

"Our bodies are biologically programmed to put on some fat just prior to winter to keep us warm and provide reserves if food is harder to come by. So we're programmed to increase our intake of carbohydrates and fats in winter, making resistance harder."

Working in an air-conditioned environment increases our chances of catching bugs, Kendon says. "It puts you at a greater risk of catching nasty bacteria, as it recirculates free radicals and other people's viruses and bacteria. Not getting an adequate amount of sunlight, which helps to synthesise vitamin D, is another risk factor."

Then there's stress. "Physical, mental, emotional or chemical (air pollution, bacteria and environmental chemicals) stress on your system reduces immune function, and that reduces resistance to bacteria," she says.

BUILDING IMMUNITY

But Kendon says a strong immune system not only reduces the chance of getting sick, but speeds up recovery.

"Each part of the immune system – our barriers (skin and membranes), antibodies and white blood cells – has different needs," she says. "Each requires various vitamins and minerals to strengthen them."

Many vitamins and minerals produce energy for our cells to work, produce antibodies, recognise bacteria in our bodies, and kill their activity. Kendon says selenium and vitamin B are necessary to create antibodies in the first place, while vitamin E helps create more white blood cells which, in turn, need vitamin A and C to fight bugs.

Good doses of omega-6 oils make our membranes flexible and prevent them from drying out, while vitamin C and bioflavonoids keep membranes tight. Vitamin C also helps manage adrenal stress.

"Zinc is essential for every part of the immune system in every way," Kendon says. "Vitamin A and D are also essential, because some of us don't get adequate sunlight in winter. And beta-carotene is an immune stimulant."

Clinical trials have shown zinc deficiency adversely affects immune system functioning, even at quite mild deficiency levels, Martin says.

"Vitamin C also works as an immuno-stimulant, increases activity of white blood cells and reduces histamine," she says.

WHICH SUPPLEMENTS?

Kendon says supplements and herbs are an easy way to replace these lost vitamins and minerals.

"Vitamin and mineral supplements are great for those times when we're not getting enough vitamins

Immune-lowering lifestyle factors

- 1 Eating poor-quality foods. Highly refined meals and snacks with lots of starch, sugar and fat don't deliver adequate nutrients to help the body ward off viruses.
- 2 Not getting enough sun, which enables vitamin D synthesis.
- 3 Working in an air-conditioned environment. Most air-pollution particles carry free radicals as well as other people's viruses and bacteria.
- 4 Being under lots of mental, physical, emotional or chemical stress. When we have difficulty managing stress, our immune systems don't function as well.
- 5 General unhappiness or depression. "Everything goes down when people are unhappy," Kendon says.

Habits that can ward off viruses

- 1 Wash hands regularly and reduce hand-to-face contact.
- 2 Get a little sunlight every day – vitamin D is an immune-system builder.
- 3 Go to bed on time. Many experts agree we need at least eight hours' sleep a night.
- 4 Eat plenty of nutrient-rich, unrefined foods.
- 5 Take good-quality supplements if you need to supplement your diet.
- 6 Reduce your stress levels by trying relaxation techniques and meditation.
- 7 Ensure the filter in your home or office air-conditioner is cleaned regularly.
- 8 Reduce your intake of sugar, alcohol, coffee and cigarettes – these are all "nutrient robbers".

and minerals, and when lifestyle issues take their toll.

"If you take supplements correctly, you can reduce cold and flu symptoms and speed up your recovery."

Kendon suggests a reliable overall recipe for preventing and attacking viruses includes a good quality multivitamin, multimineral, vitamin C, cod liver oil and/or halibut liver oil (for their vitamin A and D), an omega-3 and omega-6 supplement, and echinacea.

"Echinacea heats up the immune system, which helps destroy the virus. If the dose is good, it will build up resistance and general health," she says.

But vitamin and mineral supplements are only ever intended as supplements to an already healthy diet – not instead of.

Dr Bridgman says: "It's critically important for overall immunity to primarily maintain a healthy diet and lifestyle."

Martin says: "I will prop up someone's poor diet with supplements, but ideally this is a temporary thing to help them get back on track, or to correct a deficiency faster than diet alone allows.

"A healthy diet should be the aim; supplements should be viewed as adjunctive. Having said this, it's getting harder to get all your nutrients out of food and many people can benefit from a good quality multivitamin/mineral supplement."

■ This article is intended as general information only. If you are suffering from a cold, flu or other virus, see your doctor. Before taking supplements, it is always best to see your doctor or an accredited naturopath and herbalist, who can be found through the Australian Natural Therapists Association (www.anta.com.au).