

FACT SHEET 19

Eat Healthy to Support Your Immune System

By

Carolyn Hendry Wyatt, Extension Agent III, FCS/4-H
February 11, 2008

The month of February is National Women's Heart Month. I recently read an article by a registered dietitian, Betsy Hornick, that is the best summary of healthy eating I have ever read. I want to share it with you in this month's *LifeLinks* column.

Did you know that your eating habits play an important role in strengthening your immune system? The foods you eat—along with regular physical activity and adequate sleep—help protect your health by boosting your body's ability to fight off infection and disease. Nourishing your body with healthful foods helps to reduce your vulnerability to short-term illnesses such as colds and flu, as well as to chronic health problems such as heart disease and cancer.

Your immune system is a built-in defense against invaders that cause illness. Good nutrition supports your body's natural defenses by providing key nutrients that help boost the immune system, including vitamins A, C, and E; zinc; selenium; and vitamins B6 and B12. In addition, these same nutrients, along with several others—protein, omega-3 fatty acids, and magnesium—are important allies for battling illness, injury, fatigue, and stress.

Immune-Enhancing Tips: Eat more fruits and vegetables. There are many reasons to eat fruits and vegetables, and strengthening your immune system is yet another. Despite the many health benefits, though, most people don't eat recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables: 2 ½ cups of vegetables and 2 cups of fruits per day for a 2,000-calorie diet. Richly colored fruits and vegetables are great sources of the antioxidant vitamins A and C and also provide minerals, fiber, and other health-promoting substances. It may be tempting to rely solely on a vitamin or mineral supplement, but these cannot replace the interactions between the many nutrients found in whole foods. Remember that fruits and vegetables are available—and nutritious—in any form, including fresh, frozen, canned, dried, and as 100% juice.

Get plenty of lean protein. This includes lean meat, poultry and fish, eggs, dried beans and peas, and nuts. Protein is essential for wound healing and helps maintain your muscle during weight loss. Minerals found in protein-rich foods—including selenium, zinc, and iron—also work to keep the immune system strong. For a 2,000-calorie diet,

try to eat about 5 ½ ounces per day. One ounce is equivalent to 1 egg, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter, ¼ cup of cooked dry beans, or ½ ounce of nuts or seeds.

Include healthy fats. Fats are essential to life, but the types of fats you eat play a crucial role in your risk for developing certain diseases, such as heart disease. One healthy fat, known as omega-3, helps to reduce inflammation in the body, which plays a role in healing along with preventing illness and disease. Omega-3 fats are found in oily fish, including salmon, herring, sardines, halibut, tuna, and mackerel. Health experts recommend eating two or three 3-ounce servings of these types of fish per week for maximum benefit. You can also get omega-3 fats from walnuts, leafy greens, canola oil, and flaxseed.

Get the right amount of calories. When it comes to calories for good health and healing, your goal should be not too much and not too little. Calories provide the body with the energy it needs to ward off illness, and for healing and recovery. Without enough calories, the body will turn to protein from muscle to provide the energy it needs. Eating too many calories will result in weight gain, which in itself creates greater risk for disease. The quality of your calories also counts, which is why choosing nutrient-rich foods as described above is so important.

The Bottom Line: Think of good nutrition as an insurance policy for better health, the ability to handle stress and fight disease, and the energy to face daily challenges. The good news is, your premiums are easy to “pay”. Simply fuel your body with the nutrients it needs from a variety of healthful foods. For more information about healthy eating contact the Hardee County Extension Service at 863-773-2164. (Source: Diabetic Cooking, Jan/Feb 2008, “Healthwise” by Betsy Hornick, MS, RD, LDN).