Immunity Support on Your Plate

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

If you’ve read a headline that mentions immune boosting, don’t believe the hype. The idea of boosting the immune system with supplements or specific ingredients is misleading and scientifically inaccurate.

There are many things we can do to keep our immune system running smoothly, such as getting enough sleep, being physically active, minimizing stress and eating a balanced diet. But boosting immunity implies heightened action, which should be avoided — an overactive immune system is linked with autoimmune diseases, such as lupus or multiple sclerosis, and is equally harmful to your health as an underactive immune system. Immune boosting is a marketing term, not a medical term.

Let’s focus on supporting your immune system instead. Certain nutrients, including zinc, iron, selenium, protein and omega-3 fats, as well as vitamins C, D and E, are critical for the growth and function of immune cells. Build meals with a variety of foods to get the nutrients your body needs.

1. Get extra vegetables and fruit. They should fill half of your plate at every meal. Fresh, frozen and canned are all great choices.

2. Add protein from fish, chicken, dairy, tofu or beans. The building blocks of protein (amino acids) are essential for T-cell function, which protects the body against bacteria and viruses.

3. Choose nuts and seeds. Include Brazil nuts for selenium; walnuts and flax for omega-3 fats; pumpkin seeds for zinc; and almonds or sunflower seeds for vitamin E.

4. Enjoy fermented foods. Yogurt, kefir and fermented vegetables — such as sauerkraut or kimchi — contain probiotics, which may be linked to a strong immune system.

5. Look for vitamin D. It’s found in fish, milk, fortified plant-based beverages and eggs. If you don’t eat any of these foods or get much sun, consider asking your health care provider to check your blood levels. You may need a vitamin D supplement.

It’s also important to minimize highly processed foods, such as soft drinks, candy, fast food and salty snacks. These foods lack nutrients and can impair the production of immune cells and antibodies.

“Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else.”
— Margaret Mead

The Smart Moves Toolkit, including this issue’s printable download, Medications and Food, is at personalbest.com/extras/21V3tools.
Avoid Doom Scrolling

Repeatedly checking out bad news can be unhealthy. Of course, the internet and social media are popular ways to stay informed about things that can potentially impact your safety or that of your region: a pandemic, hurricanes or earthquakes. But doom scrolling (also known as doom surfing) — searching for and reading article after article filled with bad news — isn’t healthy.

Constantly scrolling through bad news can trigger sadness, anxiety or anger and contribute to headaches and lost sleep. What’s more, finding differing information about medical crises or worrisome topics can be confusing and result in even more doom scrolling.

“This information overload is incredibly anxiety-provoking — which is true even when the information is accurate,” says Yale New Haven infectious diseases specialist Jaimie Meyer, MD.

Try these tips to avoid, or reduce, doom scrolling:

• Go on a doom scrolling diet; check the news just once or twice daily.
• Avoid surfing for varying opinions on medical news. Dr. Meyer advises sticking to reputable sources, such as the CDC and the National Institutes of Health.
• Take a 24-hour respite from technology from sundown to sundown March 5 to 6 for the National Day of Unplugging. It’s a good way to see how much calmer you can feel when you take a vacation from doom scrolling.

Take Care of Your Kidneys!

March is National Kidney Month and time to give your kidneys a health check. Your kidneys are small organs, but they perform many important functions: removing wastes and excess fluids, helping regulate blood pressure, and keeping certain nutrients, including potassium and calcium, balanced in the body.

Thirty million Americans have kidney disease, but many don’t know it because symptoms usually aren’t evident until the disease has progressed.

What’s more, one in three Americans is at high risk for kidney disease, according to the National Kidney Foundation. Having other common health conditions, including type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, increases the risk and so does a family history of kidney failure and being age 60 or older.

Kidney health tips:

• Be careful with over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen and naproxen. If taken for a long time, NSAIDs can cause kidney damage, the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases warns.
• If you have diabetes or hypertension (which can damage kidneys), work with your health care provider to keep those conditions controlled well.
• Eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly and see your provider for scheduled check-ups, including a check of kidney health.
• If you have any symptoms of kidney problems (including difficulty urinating, swelling in your face, legs or abdomen; bloody or foamy urine; fatigue or unusual thirst), contact your provider.
Plant-Based: What Does It Mean?

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

Plant-based eating is a lifestyle where you choose to eat mostly whole foods that come from plants. The plan involves replacing highly processed foods with lots of vegetables, fruit, grains, beans, soy, lentils, nuts and seeds. Plant-based diets are good for human health and also for our planet.

Unfortunately, the popularity of the term plant-based has led some food companies to misuse the term made from plants in their advertising campaigns. This term has taken on an undeserved health halo and is being used to sell cookies, soda, chips and candy made with ingredients that were once plants, such as white flour, sugar and processed oils.

Those are not whole, nutritious foods, and this marketing ploy makes plant-based eating confusing. For example, an orange is a whole plant-based food; an orange-flavored soft drink is highly processed. Both are made from plants (sugar was once a plant) but not equally nutritious.

The bottom line? The term plant-based does not necessarily mean healthy, so buyer beware. Yes, cola, potato chips and veggie dogs may contain ingredients that came from plants, but they have been highly processed and are no longer as nutritious as the whole foods used to make them. To truly reap the benefits of a plant-based diet, choose more whole plant-based foods, including: roasted chickpeas, tofu, edamame, whole-grain noodles, canned beans, mixed nuts, nut butter, quinoa, oats and all vegetables and fruits.

And, choose fewer of these processed plant-based foods: fake meat, chips, ice cream, cookies, cake, fruit-flavored candy, juice, white bread, white rice and soft drinks.

Vegetable Bean Soup with Quinoa

1 tbsp olive oil 1 can (15 oz.) no-salt-added mixed beans, drained
1 onion, chopped 3 cups chopped kale
3 garlic cloves, chopped ½ cup quinoa
2 carrots, diced 8 cups water
2 stalks celery, diced 1 tsp salt, or more to taste
1 zucchini, diced 1 cup fresh chopped basil
1 can (28 oz.) crushed tomatoes ¼ cup freshly shredded Parmesan cheese

Add oil to a large pot set over medium heat. Add onion, garlic, carrot and celery, and stir to combine. Cook about 5 to 7 minutes. Add zucchini, tomatoes, beans, kale, quinoa, water and salt. Stir together and let cook about 15 minutes, until quinoa and vegetables are tender. Season with salt to taste. Add to bowls, and top with basil and parmesan cheese. Serve hot.

Makes 6 servings. Per serving: 208 calories | 11g protein | 5g total fat | 1g saturated fat | 3g mono fat | 1g poly fat | 35g carbohydrate | 6g sugar | 9g fiber | 478mg sodium
Q: What causes nightmares?

A: Nightmares are vivid, disturbing dreams that may awaken you, trigger fear and make it hard to fall back to sleep. The dreams typically involve plots that relate to safety or survival threats. Other factors commonly associated with nightmares include:

- Everyday life stressors or major setbacks, such as death of a loved one, loss of income, illness or traumatic events (e.g., physical injury or emotional shock).
- An irregular sleep schedule, interrupted sleep or decreased sleep time.
- Some medications, alcohol and recreational drugs.
- Sleep disorders, medical conditions and depression or other mental disorders.
- Frightening books and movies before bed.

Stress reduction, exercise, a regular sleep schedule, avoidance of triggers and resolution of mental health issues can all be helpful in reducing nightmares. If nightmares persist and interfere with your daytime functioning, consult your health care provider.