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Nutrition & Flu Pandemic

As you have likely heard, the World Health Organization (WHO) has officially declared the H1N1 flu virus a ‘pandemic’—the first global influenza pandemic in 41 years. With this designation in mind it seems like a good time to talk a little bit about nutrition and immune system function.

We all know that eating right helps our body’s systems to work properly—and the immune system is no exception. Though all nutrients are necessary for life, there are certain ones that are more important to your immune system than others. I’d like to tell you a little about these specific nutrients, and some good places to find them in *real food*.

Research has demonstrated that deficiencies in the water-soluble vitamins folate, B6, B12, and C cause immune system dysfunction. Foods rich in these nutrients are fortified cereals and beans (folate), avocados and walnuts (B6), meats & fortified products (B12), and citrus fruits (C).

A lack of the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, and E can also compromise your immune system function. Good sources of vitamin A are carrots and squash, while vitamin E is abundant in most vegetable and nut oils. Vitamin D is another story: we can actually make most of the vitamin D we need when our skin is exposed to sunlight. However, during the winter months we need to get it from foods like salmon and mackerel, or through vitamin supplements.

The minerals selenium, zinc, copper, and iron are also a necessity for proper immune system function. They can be found in meats, beans, nuts, and fortified whole grain products.

So how much of these nutrients are needed, and do those ‘immunity-boosting’ supplements really work? Typically you can meet all of your nutrient needs by eating a varied diet including some of the foods I’ve mentioned above. A multivitamin may help some folks to meet their needs, but individual vitamins are typically not necessary.

And for those ‘immunity-boosting’ supplements—steer clear. Many of these supplements contain large amounts of vitamin C, vitamin B6, and zinc, among others. While a deficiency in these nutrients can compromise immunity, it has never been proven that the massive doses in these supplements will do any good. In fact, Zicam, a ‘natural’ product marketed to fend off the common cold, has recently been pulled off the market because it has been linked to a loss of the sense of smell.

Keep in mind that any sickness can act as a double-edged sword—using nutrient stores at a greater rate while simultaneously making it more difficult to replenish those stores. By choosing foods wisely you can help to give your body everything it needs to keep its immune system running properly. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*