

A close-up photograph of a woman with brown hair tied back, smiling and holding a sprig of thyme in her mouth. She is wearing a red patterned top. The background is a soft-focus indoor setting.

HERBAL HELPERS

Discover some of the best herbs and spices to support your immune system, with Peter Jackson-Main, Herbal Medicine Director at the College of Naturopathic Medicine.

ASTRAGALUS

This is often partnered with echinacea and comes from the Chinese herbal tradition, where it's most commonly used to boost "qi" – otherwise known as energy. It's very good as supporting the lungs and is used in Chinese medicine to strengthen "wei qi" – which is the energy of your immune system.

BARBERRY BARK

Usually thought of as a liver-enhancing herb, barberry bark also supports gut health thanks to its broad-spectrum antimicrobial properties. It takes care of most pathogens that commonly affect the GI tract, and it has been used successfully to treat antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria. The isolated plant constituent berberine is also available as a supplement.

ELDER

Whether flower or berry, elder is particularly good for supporting immunity. It's known to be broadly antiviral and also helps you detox – in traditional herbal medicine it's used as a 'cooling diaphoretic', meaning it addresses the acute stage of any infection by allowing the body to release toxins through the skin. Combine it with yarrow and peppermint for even greater detoxing benefits.

ECHINACEA

This well-known immune booster is more correctly described as an "immunomodulator", meaning it supports your own body's specific needs. Take larger doses for short-term, acute conditions; if you know you are dealing with certain pathogens, take smaller maintenance doses for ongoing protection. A large dose is 30 drops of the tincture up to six times a day, at times of exposure or at the start of symptoms, and for one week maximum. A small (maintenance) dose is 15 drops, taken three times a day.

THYME

Part of the mint family, thyme contains several plants that are great for fighting infection. Thyme is one of the best as it has a strong antimicrobial and immune-enhancing effect on the upper and lower respiratory tract, as well as in the gut.

WORDS: PETER JACKSON-MAIN. PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES, SHUTTERSTOCK.



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SIBERIAN GINSENG

Run down? Then turn to Siberian ginseng. The plant is credited with delivering energy to all your organs and systems through supporting and regulating the adrenal glands. The herb helps your entire hormonal system as well as supports blood sugar balance. It also helps your bones create more white blood cells, which kill off infections.

TURMERIC

This spice is a well-known anti-inflammatory, thanks to its curcumin content, and can be used as an alternative to pharmaceutical NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen. It strengthens cell membranes making them less susceptible to infection. Turmeric is also frequently used in natural responses to cancer.

GINGER

This powerful anti-inflammatory and immunomodulatory food has antiviral properties. It's very useful in autoimmune conditions, especially rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and inflammatory bowel disease (IBS), as well as for viral illness. It also boosts your circulation and metabolism.

NETTLE

Common stinging nettles are great for your immune system as they're antibacterial, antiviral and anti-inflammatory. Nettles both deliver important nutrients for your immune system and help to detoxify, helping rid the body of any clogging, obstructing waste and toxins. They also help ease rheumatic pain in cases of musculoskeletal inflammation. Lastly, they're great to use at this time of year due to their antihistamine effects, reducing symptoms of hay fever and asthma.

GARLIC

This highly antimicrobial spice helps your body fight off acute infections thanks to its ability to ramp up the potency and efficiency of macrophages and T-cells – your immune system's killer cells. Garlic also supports immunity in your gut by promoting and harmonising the healthy bacteria living there.



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