

# Immunity As a Food and Beverage Health Benefit

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## How sound is immune-system health as a nutraceutical benefit, both scientifically and from a marketing standpoint?

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Good nutrition has always been important to good health. But can it keep you from getting sick?

Ingredients from anthocyanin to zinc, and foods from almonds to yogurt, are said to boost the human immune system. Ingestibles that supposedly keep the doctor away run the gamut from homey stuff like chicken soup and apples to exotic fare like amaranth seeds.

**[What herbs, roots, and plants can be used in food and beverage formulations to help boost immunity? Download our Glossary of Plants Used for Immune System Health to learn more](#)**

There are various reasons for this approach. One is that, as health benefits go, immunity tends not to be top-of-mind with many consumers.

“Consumers associate immunity with sickness,” says Shelley Balanko, senior vice president with the Hartman Group. “It’s more of a reactive health word, rather than a word that connotes proactive wellness, and that’s kind of where consumers are right now. They’re trying to be more proactive.”

Mark Stavro, senior director of marketing for Bunge North America, agrees. “Until recently, many people have given thought to immune health only after they’ve developed an illness,” he says. “As such, the general consumer hasn’t regularly been looking for food and beverage products touting immune health. However, the tides seem to be shifting toward a more proactive approach to immune health, and adding claims on packaged goods could become more popular.”

Bunge markets soybean and canola oils that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which are sometimes promoted as benefitting the immune system. However, they are more often touted as heart-healthy or brain-healthy. This is an example of how immunity often comes up: in tandem with other aspects of health, or with health as a whole. In other words, separating “immune system health” from health in general can be tricky.

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### Defining terms

Part of the problem is defining what “the immune system” even is. Most people associate getting sick with symptoms like runny noses, fever and lethargy. These are what doctors call the “innate response” to an invasion by bacteria or viruses: a crude, initial effort by the body to deal with the problem. The mucus in a runny nose is intended to flush out the invaders; the fever is an attempt to cook them to death, and the lethargy keeps you indoors and away from more of the bad bugs.

That’s the body’s first line of defense. The second, called the “acquired response,” involves producing antibodies that specifically target and eliminate the invading microorganisms. This is more sophisticated and effective (and is the basis for vaccines, which use dead or weakened microorganisms to elicit antibody production). But it takes five to 10 days to go into effect, which is why humans evolved the innate response: as a sort of holding action until the acquired response can get under way.

ImmunityAid is a product of LifeAid Beverage Co. that targets the immune system.

Given this set of facts, it becomes difficult to describe just what it means to “boost the immune system.” Is it treating or suppressing the symptoms of the innate response? There isn’t much that ingested nutrients can do in that regard, other than physically soothe membranes ravaged by mucus or fever. (Hot liquids do this, especially soup, which usually takes longer to consume ounce-for-ounce than hot beverages, exposing the throat and nostrils to heat longer.)

As for the acquired response, certain vitamins and minerals like zinc are indeed necessary for the production of antibodies. However, most consumers with access to a reasonably healthy diet already get all of these they need for that purpose, experts say.

Manufacturers of supplements that claim to boost immunity “might not say anything untrue, but what they are doing is implying that if someone on a normal diet takes them they will improve their immune function, which is plain wrong,” Charles Bangham, a professor of immunology and infectious diseases at Imperial College London, told The Guardian.

## Supplement or diet?

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While that principle may apply to dietary supplements, it doesn’t necessarily hold for nutrients in the main diet, says Nancy Farrell Allen, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. “I do believe that there is evidence-based information promoting the use of nutrients to aid our immune system in defending our bodies against illness and disease,” she says.

There is an important difference between nutrients ingested as supplements and as part of the regular diet, Farrell Allen says: “Nutrients are more bioavailable and best absorbed from the foods we eat. Also, the cost of food is generally less expensive than purchasing supplements.”

Hartman's Balanko believes that consumers are more likely to go for supplements like vitamin C or echinacea when they actually get sick. Immune health, she believes, tends to get subsumed under other health benefits like better digestion or reduced stress.

"When we have a maladaptive response to stress, that's when we get sick," she says. "So it's a benefit, but it's a couple of steps removed from where the consumer is targeting their efforts."

Many companies that market foods or beverages with purported immunity benefits do so as part of a line of products with a variety of other benefits. LifeAid Beverage Co. ([www.lifeaidbevco.com](http://www.lifeaidbevco.com)) produces ImmunityAid as part of a line of beverages (technically, dietary supplements) with health benefits like increased energy and improved cognitive function.

Choice Organic Teas puts out a line of wellness teas based on the immunity-boosting properties of mushrooms.

When it comes to immunity as a consumer priority, "I would rank it just behind fitness and cognitive health," says Aaron Hinde, LifeAid's president and cofounder. "That is until you find yourself under the weather, then it suddenly shoots to the very top." Hinde says that he expects ImmunityAid, which has echinacea, zinc, vitamin C, vitamin D3, and astragalus (an herb used in traditional Chinese medicine), to become one of LifeAid's most popular SKUs.

On the other hand, Choice Organic Teas ([choiceorganict teas.com](http://choiceorganict teas.com)) markets an entire line of mushroom-based teas (again, technically "herbal dietary supplements"—more on that below) whose primary benefit is immunity support. The SKUs in that line feature reishi or shiitake mushrooms, matched with other ingredients like turmeric or matcha tea for secondary benefits like energy or healthy metabolism.

This line was a natural fit for immunity benefits because of the nature of both "medicinal mushrooms" and tea, says Eric Ring, vice president of operations for Choice Organic Teas.

"Immune supporting products are very popular in the marketplace, and teas are often affiliated with making you feel better when you're sick," Ring says. "The great thing about mushroom teas is that mushrooms not only support immune system health, they have properties that do so much more than battle the common cold."

Medicinal mushrooms, he says, have immune-boosting components including antioxidants, vitamins, minerals and amino acids. These substances are "adaptogens" that "modulate instead of attack" bodily reactions like stuffy noses and fever for a more balanced response to illness, he says.

## Power of plants

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Hands on Herbs Organics Ltd. ([www.handsonherbsorganics.com](http://www.handsonherbsorganics.com)) markets a line of

“medicinal teas” with a range of health benefits, one of which is Immune Brew. Spokesperson Agnieszka Rivington says that Immune Brew harnesses the power of the plants it’s made from.

“Just like humans, plants also must deal with potentially harmful viruses and bacteria, and therefore develop compounds to protect themselves from such attacks,” Rivington says. “It all stems from the plant’s ability to create its own internal chemicals, and just like our own immune systems, are designed to counter any microbes, so in turn the phytonutrients present in plants give us a hand in protecting our own defenses.” These plants include elderberry, yarrow herb, raspberry, coltsfoot, greater plantain, sunflower petals and common mallow.

Elderberry is being touted for its immune benefits by nutraceutical ingredients supplier Artemis International ([www.artemis-international.com](http://www.artemis-international.com)). “Artemis’ goal is for elderberry to share the position at the top of the immune system support hierarchy with vitamin C,” the company says in a release. John Sauve, Artemis’ vice president of marketing, says the flavonoid component of dark elderberries is what gives it its health benefits.

“The awareness and interest in black elderberry nutraceutical ingredients are on a steep climb over the last few years because of the intensity of the cold and flu seasons,” Sauve says.

## Supplemental information

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All of the above products are officially supplements, not beverages. (Hands on Herbs Organics labels its medicinal tea line, including Immune Brew, as herbal teas, but uses the Supplement Facts panel instead of Nutrition Facts.) This is the usual practice for marketing nutraceuticals with specific health claims, due to FDA regulations.

Beetology is a line of beverages with a base of beet juice, which is claimed to reduce the severity of colds.

Supplements have more latitude both in what they can claim and in the kinds of ingredients they can use; they don’t need specific permission for ingredients that are not on the Generally Recognized as Safe list.

Marketers who don’t want to go the supplement route have to use more subtle, secondary techniques to tout benefits like immunity boosting. That’s what Kayco ([www.kayco.com](http://www.kayco.com)), which claims to be the largest manufacturer and distributor of kosher foods and beverages in the U.S., is doing for its Beetology line of vegetable-fruit beverages based on cold-pressed beet juice.

Beetology harnesses aspects of beets, including antioxidants and vitamins B and C, to boost the immune system, says Kim Cassar, Kayco’s vice president of marketing. “Drinking beet juice can actually reduce the severity and length of time of the common cold,” Cassar says.

But because Beetology is marketed as a beverage, Kayco doesn't make explicit health claims for it. Instead, to put out the health message, it depends on two indirect approaches. One is hoping that health-conscious consumers will appreciate what Cassar calls the "ridiculously clean" ingredient list; the other is what amounts to modern-day word-of-mouth: social media influencers on health-related blogs and other websites.

"What we do is, we partner with different health enthusiasts and health influencers that have tried the product and that have felt the difference in their lifestyle and in their health after consuming the product," Cassar says. "In terms of claims, we're really letting the product talk for itself, through the eyes and the messages of influencers of social media."

When it comes to potential appeal to health-minded consumers, the immune system may not be as fertile ground as the heart or the brain. But some industry players say it has a lot of potential.

"Positioning a food or beverage product on an immunity related benefit versus digestive or cardiac health for the purpose of increasing the demand for the product is certainly in the cards now for some products and likely a lot more in the years ahead," says Sauve of Artemis International. "Benefit segmentation for food and beverages is a game that we should expect marketers to play in a health-driven marketplace."