

# How to Strengthen Your Gut

## To Get Through Cold and Flu Season



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**D**uring the winter, frequent changes in temperature can suppress the immune system and make even the fittest of athletes more prone to those winter colds and influenza viruses. Taking a look at your gut health is a great way to help your body fight off infection this time of year. Your digestive tract is teeming with microbes — microscopic bacteria that can be both good and bad — that are often referred to as your microbiome. The gut microbiome is sometimes called the “forgotten organ,” because while many of people don’t think about this group of cells, scientists have learned that it can have a dramatic impact on overall health.

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But more people are starting to pay attention and turn to probiotics to boost the “healthy” bacteria in their microbiome. Found in some foods and as supplements sold in drugstores and health retail shops, probiotics are living bacteria and yeasts that provide a variety of health benefits, including aiding in digestion and strengthening the immune system. Additionally, prebiotics, which are natural, nondigestible carbohydrate food sources, like whole grains and bananas, nourish the probiotics in your gut and can be combined with probiotic foods or supplements to promote good bacterial growth. According to the Mayo Clinic, more research is needed, but there is evidence that probiotics and prebiotics may help diarrhea (especially after taking certain antibiotics) and irritable bowel

syndrome, speed treatment of some types of intestinal infections, ease some allergic disorders such as eczema and hay fever, and — most importantly — prevent or reduce the severity of colds and flus.

There is also emerging evidence that probiotics and prebiotics can help with acute respiratory tract infections. One of the most common illnesses tennis players experience, acute RTIs occur when the body is exposed to cold temperatures, causing a reduction in core temperature that weakens the immune system. According to studies by several research groups, the administration of probiotics may have a beneficial effect on the severity and duration of symptoms.

If you’re considering taking supplements, always check with your doctor to make sure they’re the right ones for you. Make sure you also discuss any diet changes that would increase your probiotic and prebiotic intake. If you get the go-ahead from your physician and are looking for foods that naturally contain probiotics and live cultures, here’s a handy list:

- kefir
- sourkraut
- kombucha
- yogurt
- salted pickles
- apple cider vinegar
- olives in brine
- miso soup
- tempeh
- sour dough bread

Consider consulting a registered and sport dietitian to help in setting up your training diet to enhance your immunity for a winning winter season! ●

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