



**10 FOODS**

— **THAT** —

**WRECK**

**YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM**

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# INTRODUCTION

The human immune system is a complex array of organs, cells and chemicals which serves to protect you. Invading viruses, bacteria and fungi are all silently dealt with on your behalf. Without an immune system you would become severely ill and quickly die. Unfortunately, the system is not perfect and an alarming number of medical conditions are due to the immune system getting confused and even attacking the body. These autoimmune diseases are being linked to the foods we eat, causing devastating, avoidable, effects to this vital system.

## What is the immune system?

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The immune system is responsible for detecting and destroying any organisms which get through the physical layer of defense provided by the skin. When invaders get past this protective layer, in food or cuts, our body has a host of mechanisms it draws upon to remove danger and repair damage.

## How does the immune system work?

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Many different highly specialized organs, cells and chemicals play a role in the immune system:

- The spleen filters the blood and removes old cells
- The thymus and bone marrow make specific blood and immune cells
- The lymph system removes waste products and provides cells with nutrients
- Lymph nodes filter the blood and act as the ‘battle ground’ for clashes between the immune system and external invaders (which is why they swell when you are ill)
- Hormones and chemicals act as messengers, informing the system about potential threats
- A huge variety of highly specialized white blood cells identify, disable and kill foreign cells

The immune system can ‘turn up’ or ‘turn down’ the response to threats, in the same way that a car has both an accelerator and a break to control its speed. Some

allergies are the result of the immune system wrongly ‘applying the accelerator’ and overreacting to non-dangerous items, such as peanuts.

## Food and the immune system

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Because we take food willingly into our bodies some of the usual defense mechanisms are bypassed. Digested food particles enter the bloodstream through intestinal walls, and can wreak havoc with our immune system. Below we examine food and drinks which have been proven to negatively impact the immune system.

## 1) Sugar

The health promoting effects of Vitamin C were discovered back in the 1970's, specifically the vitamin's ability to help us combat colds. Taking Vitamin C supplements can support immune function, but if you are also eating sugar then the positive effects will be severely reduced. The physical shape of Vitamin C closely resembles that of the glucose molecule, released from sugars in our diet. Unfortunately the similar physical structure of the two molecules, glucose and Vitamin C, means cells can take up sugar by accident instead of the vitamin that they require. The spike in blood sugar from eating refined sugar, such as sweets and cakes, is enough to confuse the immune system for 4 to 6 hours and reduces white blood cells function by 75%.

Studies have also linked High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS), which is a hidden sugar additive in many processed foods, to inflammation. The HFCS causes stimulation of the immune system leading to inflammation, potentially causing a wide range of diseases, including high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes. The American Journal of Clinical nutrition reported that sugars reduce functionality of specific immune cells, including neutrophils and lymphocytes while natural sugars, like honey, seem to have less of a problematic effect.

## 2) Alcohol

After consumption alcohol is absorbed directly in the stomach, it gets into the bloodstream relatively easily. Some research has suggested alcohol can have a positive effect on the immune system, boosting vaccine response and the natural resveratrol in red wine has proven health benefits. However, the negative impact of even moderate alcohol consumption would seem to outweigh the minimal positives.

Alcohol reduces the body's ability to absorb and utilize nutrients, vital to a healthy immune system. While consuming one unit of alcohol has a negligible effect on the immune system, having just three drinks has a measurable negative impact. Alcohol inhibits creation of new white blood cells, needed to patrol and protect the body. It also specifically suppresses the production of a key chemical, Tumor Necrosis Factor, which protects us from cancerous cells. The more you drink the more damage is done. Studies

investigating alcoholism also found that alcohol impairs the brains response to signals from the immune system, reducing your ability to react to infection.

### **3) Food colorings**

While looking for new ways reduce organ rejection in transplant patients, scientists made an unusual discovery. Using high doses of Caramel food coloring, commonly used in popular fizzy drinks, they were able to successfully inhibit the immune response. Specifically the food colorant stopped the white blood cells getting to the sites of infection as they were unable to move from the thymus into the lymph system.

In a review of food colorings undertaken by the European Food Safety Authority findings indicate that one of the 4 classes of caramel food colorings, when combined with low Vitamin B6 levels, did have a significant immune suppressing effect. The panel undertaking the review of the colorants found specifically that “immunomodulatory effects have been seen in a number of studies”.

### **4) Artificial sweeteners**

Aspartame is an artificial sweetener made from aspartic acid and phenylalanine. The aspartic acid causes excitotoxicity in the brain, it over stimulates neurons until they die, while the phenylalanine interferes with stomach acids. It was originally approved as a as a low-calorie alternative to sugar in the 1980’s, despite objections from leading neurologists. Aspartame now accounts for 75% of adverse reactions to food additives reported to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) each year.

One of the key physical immune defenses, in addition to the skin, is the contents of the stomach. The stomach acids are so potent many pathogens are killed on contact, and reducing the stomach acidity would suppress this vital line of defense. Phenylalanine was discovered when researchers were actively looking for ways to reduce stomach acidity to treat ulcers. The phenylalanine in aspartame lowers stomach pH and increases susceptibility to food borne viruses and bacteria which could make us ill.

Another artificial sweetener which affects the immune system, specifically the gut, is sucralose, which has been linked to Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). IBD is a collective name for a group of moderate to severe disorders affecting the gut and intestine. The incidence of this group of auto-immune disorders has been increasing dramatically in the last few decades, specifically in the US and UK and most recently in Canada. The Canadian Journal of Gastroenterology has linked the dramatic increase in these debilitating conditions to the introduction of sucralose, brand name Splenda, in 1991.

Splenda was introduced as an artificial sweetener and added to a huge variety of foods including breakfast cereals, cakes and desserts, chewing gum, sweets and other processed foods. Further studies by the Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health found that Splenda affects the acidity of the intestine and kills off as much as 50% of the good bacteria usually found there which aid our digestive processes. Further studies in rats linked the chlorinated sweetener to a reduction in the weight of the thymus and spleen and a reduced white blood cell count.

## **5) Caffeine**

A major suppressor of immune system is stress, high amounts of stress, physical or emotional, have well documented negative effects on the immune system. Highly stressed people get more colds and recover more slowly from infections. The stress response in the body is mediated by the hormone adrenaline. Our ancestors relied on adrenaline to prepare them for high energy pursuits, such as fighting off predators or sprinting during a hunt. However, this mechanism is only meant to be applied in short bursts of activity and once the danger has passed the system is designed to suppress these stressor hormones and relax.

Unfortunately the hectic pace of our lives and constant external stimulation means the stressed state is remaining switched on, and caffeine is a major culprit. Caffeine mimics the endogenous neurotransmitter adenosine, which normally signals to your brain that you are getting tired. When you consume caffeine this natural response is blocked meaning you don't feel tired. In addition this blocking effect means your dopamine levels increase which also provides some additional energy. But when the caffeine wears off all the adenosine which was previously blocked is free to enter the receptors and you feel even more tired than before.



In addition to blocking adenosine, caffeine stimulates the adrenal glands and other parts of the central nervous system, causing the release of adrenaline and other stress hormones. It also blocks the release of serotonin, which naturally keeps us feeling calm. When combined with sugar in a morning 'coffee-fix' this is an immune suppressing cocktail which although temporarily stimulating has long term negative effects.

## **6) Soda**

The State of California recently passed a bill which requires a warning label on sodas concerning their contribution to diabetes, obesity and tooth decay. Both regular and diet sodas contain absolutely no nutritional value for your body while being jam packed full of immune suppressing ingredients and addictive substances.

These artificial cocktails contain either sugar or artificial sweeteners, both of which have a negative impact on the immune system. Two of the most popular sodas also use the aforementioned caramel food colorings to achieve their distinctive color; they also usually contain caffeine impacting the immune system even more. The preservative Sodium Benzoate is also commonly used, which has been linked to DNA damage. Cola flavored drinks contain phosphoric acid which damages bones and lead to states of chronic inflammation. Sodas have also been directly linked to metabolic syndrome and kidney disease. If you wanted to purposefully design a drink to ruin your health, it would be sodas.

## **7) Refined Grains**

Whole grains contain fiber, essential amino acids and nutrients, but during the refining process almost all are lost. Refining grains involves making them smaller, grinding or milling and other chemical processing. The parts of the grain containing the beneficial nutrients and fiber are removed and the high temperatures used in the industrial milling processes reduce the nutrient content further. The processing causes chemical changes which increase the ratio of carbohydrate, making refined grains more like a sugar.

In 1910 white flour was declared 'unfit for human consumption' in Missouri after an extensive review performed by the North Dakota Agricultural College. The process was found to be dangerous for human health and in contravention of the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906). Despite this ruling, the political pressure from the millers allowed this purely cosmetic process to continue, without regard for its toxicity.

White flour is still bleached to make it look more appealing and 'age' the flour, removing the natural yellow tint with chlorine gas. A byproduct of the bleaching process is Alloxan, a chemical used by scientists to induce diabetes in mice, by destroying cells in the pancreas. The chlorine gas reacts with xanthine, an additive in the dough, to produce the toxic substance. The increased incidence of diabetes has been linked to this toxic and completely unnecessary by product of flour cosmetic-enhancement.

Studies in the Journal of Nutrition saw a direct relationship between eating refined grains and markers of inflammation associated with cancer. Refined grains have also been linked to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, because they increase blood pressure. Recent studies in the European Journal of Epidemiology have suggested public health recommendations to replace refined grains with whole grains to reduce the risk of diabetes. The journal of the American College of Nutrition reported that switching from refined to whole grains would lead to a reduction in overall mortality of nearly 20%.

## **8) Rancid fats and oil**

When fats break-down they become rancid; we can sometimes detect this rancidity by the stale smell or taste. Over time fats will naturally break-down due to the presence of oxygen but under high heat this process speeds up. Rancid fats contain lots of reactive free radicals which cause extensive damage to the body and immune system. Free radicals are found on molecules with 'unpaired electrons'. Being in a pair makes electrons stable, but free and unpaired they react with anything they come into contact with and can damage the immune system.

Free radicals are naturally produced by some of the processes in your body and these are mopped up by superoxide dismutase. As we get older our ability to mop up free radicals reduces and we start to see the symptoms of aging and degeneration, especially in the skin. Introducing external sources of free radicals speeds up the aging process, and causes cellular damage which leads to cancer and other diseases. The free

radicals react with DNA causing damage which can lead to cancer, they also damage cell membranes and the journal of Oleo Science linked rancid fats specifically with liver damage.

Saturated or solid fats are less prone to rancidity while partially saturated fats, like vegetable oils are more susceptible. Artificially polyunsaturated fats, like margarine, are the most likely to become rancid quickly as they are the least stable. Some oils and margarines are already partially rancid when you buy them as they are produced at high temperatures and not protected from light while on the shelf.

Even the healthiest oils can become dangerous when repeatedly used, especially when heated up to their 'smoke points'. Flax oil, for example, becomes rancid very quickly when heated and also goes off when exposed to light. Some oils, such as peanut oil, are less sensitive to temperature and can withstand high heat cooking processes better. Margarine contains some of the worst processed fats and natural, organic butter, is a much healthier alternative.

## **9) Sea foods**

In addition to the worms and parasites which can be found in uncooked fish and shellfish they can also contain poisons such as methyl mercury. Methyl mercury is a bio-accumulative toxin, this means it collects in the bodies of marine life affected by pollution and is then passed on to us. The bio-magnification of the toxin means that minute amounts absorbed by plankton is magnified as it passed up the food chain to us.

The structure of methyl mercury is similar to the amino acid methionine and it uses this similarity to be transported around the body, including into the brain. Exposure to methyl mercury triggers the production of the inflammatory messengers cytokinins and specific autoantibodies. Auto antibodies are accidentally targeted at the body, causing the body to attack itself. Studies in the International Journal of the Environment linked mercury intake to specific antibodies being the thyroid, which may be related to the increase in thyroid related disorders.

## **10) Canned food**

The Journal of Autoimmune diseases has published a groundbreaking study linking Bisphenol A (BPA) used to coat the inside of tins and cans, to autoimmunity. BPA was already known to be an endocrine disrupter, but this paper indicates it is involved in a whole host of other process known to disrupt the immune system and cause serious damage. Mechanisms which trigger autoimmunity, the body attacking itself, correlated with the amount of BPA consumed. This shows a direct link with eating canned foods and autoimmune diseases such as Arthritis.

## CONCLUSION

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### **Eat natural!**

During processing food is adulterated to make it more cost efficient for the manufacturers. The processes applied to foods and the chemicals being added are slowly toxifying our bodies and having a serious negative impact on health. Autoimmune and inflammatory diseases are becoming more common and more deadly. The cost of cheap food, enhanced taste and industry profits is slowly killing us, but, the antidote is simple.

Natural foods such as fruit, vegetables and whole grains have a positive impact on our health, even undoing damage already done. The immune system does an amazing job, but it needs to be supported with the anti-oxidants, vitamins, minerals and essential amino acids it needs to keep you healthy. Eliminating the immune damaging foods and replacing them with natural wholesome foods will leave you feeling healthier and quickly have a significant long term impact.