

Beyond vitamins: Botanicals for immunity



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People often think about immunity only when their own immune systems are challenged. They consider remedies and other reactive strategies, rather than focusing on the role of good nutrition to strengthen immunity. There's nothing wrong with using natural remedies when needed, but immunity is supposed to provide constant protection. Botanicals, along with essential vitamins and minerals plus probiotics, can be a useful addition in fortifying our immune systems to assure that we can more competently resist various challenges that could otherwise undermine our health.

Botanicals, such as herbs and plant foods, tend to contain a multitude of compounds. Some have hundreds of known constituents in varying amounts. Naturally, these materials will have a range of potential benefits and effects. Where these overlap with components of other ingredients in a formula, the effects can be effectively strengthened by duplication. Where the effects differ, formulas can still provide additional benefits over single ingredient products by affecting alternate biochemical pathways to work in parallel. Both of these possibilities can be termed 'synergistic' because the whole is more than the sum of the individual parts.

There are numerous options for botanical support of our immune systems. Let's look at a few:

Black elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) is a fruit from a small tree with a long history of use as a tonic in traditional European herbal systems. Black elderberries possess a variety of natural compounds that help to maintain health and well-being, such as potent free radical-scavenging anthocyanidins and other beneficial nutrients. Black elderberries exert immunomodulating properties, which are attributed to their flavonoid constituents (i.e., anthocyanidins). Certain elderberry extracts have also been found to moderate healthy inflammatory processes to support normal immune function. Anthocyanidins in elderberry are typically absorbed within 30 minutes after ingestion. Elderberry also provides vitamins A and C, which are potent free radical scavengers. Vitamins and minerals are essential for proper immune response.

Olive leaf extract (*Olea europea*) is primarily used for immune support and is best known for its potent oleuropein glucosides and active polyphenols, which are free radical fighters. Olive leaf extract has long been used as an immunomodulatory, GI-health-promoting, botanical supplement.

Oil of oregano (wild oregano, wild marjoram) contains carvacrol and thymol, which have been suggested to be responsible for its immune-modulating properties including an ability to moderate healthy inflammatory activities. Our immune systems use oxidation and inflammation as tools to clean up debris and as weapons to protect us, but we have to maintain a healthy control system to keep this activity within normal

bounds. Antioxidants and other dietary free radical fighters are an integral part of our healthy immune response systems.

Arabinogalactan from larch tree bark has been shown to promote immunomodulation in response to microbial challenges. It has also been shown to support the growth of beneficial intestinal flora (probiotics), which play an integral role in healthy immune system function.

Aged garlic products are great, with many documented health benefits. But one thing that differentiates them from fresh garlic is that the compounds that create a substance called allicin in fresh garlic evaporate quickly on exposure to air. But today we find specially stabilized clinically tested forms of allicin derived from fresh garlic in some natural products. Allicin products don't duplicate all of the benefits of whole garlic, but do have their own unique immune-supporting abilities. For example, in a double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled study with 146 volunteers, supplementation with a stabilized allicin product for 3 months (between November and February) resulted in statistically significant support of normal immune system performance in adults exposed to common winter season challenges.

I always recommend a multivitamin-mineral formula to cover the nutritional bases. Enhance your nutritional program with botanicals that reduce stress and support healthy immunity.