

Winter Nutrition

by Emily Miazga, M.Sc Clinical Nutrition
Creator of Em's Power Cookies & Bars
3x Speight's Coast to Coast winner

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It seems quite odd to me to be writing an article on winter nutrition and how to stay healthy through the cold season: as I write this, I am in Bend, Oregon, and about to head out to Smith Rock for a few days of rock climbing. It's pretty blissy here and I promise to try and not mention it again as you're sitting in chilly NZ thinking about braving the elements. Did I mention it's summer here?

There are not as many events and races happening over winter, so you don't have to worry as much about post-race nutrition to avoiding getting sick after hard efforts. But if you want to maintain fitness over winter, inevitably you will be out in the elements training, or hopefully enjoying some good days on the ski slopes.



Because of the cold weather, and higher incidence of bugs floating around there is a greater risk of getting sick. Last year, I personally struggled with illness and it set me back quite a bit having developed pneumonia. Hopefully some of these tips can help you to stay healthy and strong.

My first suggestion is to keep your home as warm and dry as possible. I realize this doesn't have much to do with nutrition and I am no expert on home insulation, but this is an important part of avoiding illness. There is good research to show that warm dry homes are healthier especially for elderly people and children. Look into getting your roof insulated, as this is where most heat is lost. Also, double-paned windows and thick thermal curtains can help to keep warmth in. Using a good heat-pump system or approved wood-burner can heat the main living spaces of homes easily and efficiently. Investing upfront in making your home more efficient will save you in the long term; heating a drafty house is inefficient and expensive.

Eating a healthy diet in general can bolster what dietitians call the nutritional status of the body. A healthy diet can better equip the body's immune system to deal with viruses. If the body is run down, or stressed and not nutritionally sound then that is when illness can take over. There are many factors involved, some can be controlled, like your nutrition.

1. Eat your veggies. I suggest going for seasonal food choices. Winter

vegetables like pumpkins, potatoes, and carrots are full of vitamin C and A (beta carotene). These are good antioxidants and can help to bolster the body's immune system. Use these for making soups and veggie stews. These types of dishes are hot and hearty, taste great, and are an easy way to get in vitamins and minerals. My Mum always taught me not to be a slave to a recipe, so here is a quick and easy favourite of mine - use as a guide and mix in whatever other ingredients and spices you like:

3-4 large potatoes, scrubbed (not peeled), cubed
1/2 small-medium pumpkin, cubed
1 large onion, diced
few stalks celery, chopped
3-4 large carrots, diced
1 large bunch spinach or silverbeet, chopped
2 tins crushed tomatoes
1-2 c frozen peas
1-2 c mixed beans, lentils or chick peas (tinned/drained or dried/soaked)
lots of chopped garlic (I use a whole head of garlic)
lots of chilli - powder, dried, or fresh (I use 5-6 chillies)
salt and pepper to taste
any other spices you like - feel free to add whatever you like
sometimes I add ginger, cinnamon, coriander or garam masala for a more ethnic taste

In a large soup pot, add a couple cups of water and simmer the veggies that take longer to cook - the potatoes, pumpkin, carrot, etc. Don't drain the water - that's where all the nutrients are. Once cooked until fork tender, add the other ingredients. Continue to simmer, and stir as needed. It should be a thick, hearty-looking stew. If you like you can add 1-2 tbsp olive oil or butter for some extra flavour. Serve with some thick multi-grain toast or rice.

This dish is filled with vitamins, minerals, protein, good quality carbohydrates, high in fibre and is also low fat. It is perfect for a heart-warming winter meal, is very tasty and easy to make.

2. Make sure you are getting in lot's of antioxidants: vitamin A, C, E. Eating citrus fruit is a great way to get in vitamin C, and also those winter veggies mentioned earlier are another good source. Vitamin E supplements have shown some benefits and a low-dose supplement of vitamin C and E is a good idea over winter. Taking high-dose supplements can inhibit your body's natural antioxidant production and you end up worse off. Talk to a pharmacist or alternative health expert for more information and dosing specifics. One of my favourite hot drinks to make is hot lemon and fresh chopped ginger with manuka honey. It tastes zingy and if you're feeling a tinge of a sore throat, is a natural way to help combat it and ease a sore throat. Another good idea is to whizz up smoothies that contain apples and kiwis, spirulina, and even add some greens like silverbeet or broccoli.

3. Protein: getting enough protein in the diet is important to maintain

nutritional status, and also to ensure enough iron is consumed, especially for women. Low iron levels may be correlated with recurrent illness. It is easy to get in enough protein, as the RDA is 0.8g protein/kg body weight. However athletes need more and can go up to 2.0g protein/kg. 1 serving of most meats provide about 20 grams protein. 1 c milk - 8 g, 1 egg - 7g and multigrain breads, nuts, seeds and cheese also are a good sources of protein. Red meat, liver and mussels are a great source of iron. Vitamin C helps to enhance iron absorption and cooking in cast iron pots and pans helps too. For vegetarians, non-haeme iron (plant-based iron) needs support from vitamin C, and avoid caffeine 1 hr either side of an iron-rich meal.

Its easy to make healthy food taste good and this is your best bet for taking on the NZ winter. Try to avoid eating too much junk food and take-aways because they are usually quite high in fat and can result in putting on unwanted weight; limit take-aways to 1x per week. Use the winter season as an opportunity to cook more meals at home and practice making hearty and delicious food. Buy a good recipe book. Your immune system will thank you for it.

Enjoy the winter, and see you in spring. I'll try not to get too much sun while away.

Cheers,
EM

Emily Miazga, Creative Director
Award-Winning Em's Power Cookies & Bars
* NEW ADDRESS*
PO Box 23
Ngakawau
Hector 7867
West Coast, NZ
p +64 (0)3 782 8999
m +64 (0)27 274 4370
www.powercookies.com