

# 9 Vegan Foods to Strengthen Your Immune System



Leah Favela

It's a bit scary out there in the world right now. A lot of things feel beyond our control. But the one thing you can control is how you love and take care of yourself. And a simple way to do that is to get lots of yummy, immune-boosting foods into your diet. According to a 2017 study published in [ScienceDirect](#), a diet full of nutrient-rich foods can play an important role in improving immune system function.

The list of plant-based foods that strengthen the immune system goes well into the double-digits. I've made you a short and sweet list of some of my favorite foods (and drink) to help you keep your immune system strong and healthy.

## 1) Sweet Potato

Vitamin A is essential for healthy skin, and healthy skin isn't just aesthetically pleasing, it also acts as a barrier against bacteria and viruses that try to get into your body. One of the

best ways to get Vitamin A into your diet is by eating foods that contain beta-carotene which increases T cell activity (“helper” cells that fight against infection). [Orange-fleshed sweet potatoes are one of the best sources of beta carotene](#), and they’re delicious!

My partner often throws a sweet potato in the microwave for about five minutes and eats it plain. I prefer mine with just a touch of salt and a little maple syrup. You can also try my recipe for sweet potato buddha bowls; they’re easy, fast, nutritious, and delicious!

## 2) Red Bell Peppers & Hummus

Hummus is a healthy, protein-packed plant-based snack that in itself has been linked to a variety of health benefits. But the star of the show here, when it comes to immunity-boosting, are the red bell peppers.

Bell peppers are an [excellent source of vitamin C](#) and studies have shown that the concentration of this vitamin goes up as the fruit ripens, meaning a red (ripe) bell pepper has higher amounts than a green (immature) bell pepper. Along with large amounts of Vitamin C, red bell peppers are full of [antioxidants](#) that help your cells fight against free radicals.

So the next time you’re looking for something to munch on, pair some red bell pepper slices with a big ‘ole scoop (or two) of hummus for a healthy and filling immunity-boosting snack!

### 3) Basil

[Studies show](#) the basil leaf has a variety of health benefits, including the ability to increase T cell activity as well as natural killer cells, a type of white blood cell which is extremely important to a healthy immune system.

In the summertime, I love to drink water flavored with basil and strawberries. Cut the strawberries into halves and give your basil a good smack between your palms before putting it into the water. Did you know that slapping basil (and many other herbs) bursts their cell membranes and releases essential oils that make its smell and flavor stronger? Well, now you know so if you take nothing from this list but that fact, at least I taught you something.

I love a big bowl of pesto pasta with vegetarian “meat” balls (if you’re not feeling like making your own [Gardein’s](#) makes some really good ones) and colorful steamed or roasted veggies. A lot of recipes use nutritional yeast, an ingredient I have a love/hate relationship with, for the cheesy parmesan flavor and I’m not a big fan of the flavor it imparts into the sauce. My favorite vegan pesto pasta recipe from [GoDairyFree](#) only requires 5 ingredients with nutritional yeast as an optional add-in. Plus there are lots of other customizations to suit your mood or preference. Buon appetito!

## 4) Mushrooms

Oyster, button, reishi, lion's mane, turkey tail....pretty much any edible mushroom out there is packed with a multitude of health benefits. [Clinical studies](#) show that along with improved brain function and weight management, mushrooms support a healthy gut environment for bacteria, reduce inflammation, and boost immune response.

My 3 favorite mushrooms recipes:

[Mushroom Gochujang Pasta](#)-The Korean Vegan

This one might sound a bit strange to you, but it is super easy and deee-licious. I use a package of dehydrated mixed mushrooms (black fungus, shiitake, oyster, elephant ear, and a few others) and rehydrate them in a bowl of boiling water for about 15–20 minutes. Save the leftover mushroom water (mushroom dashi) in a jar for a few days and substitute it for the water in other recipes. You can even cook rice in it for an added umami flavor and health boost.

[Steamed Buns with Hoisin Glazed Shiitakes](#)-The Spruce Eats

When meat-eating friends come over for dinner this is often what I cook. It's simple, easy to make in larger amounts, and a crowd-pleaser. I've gotten asked for the recipe several times which is great as I love showing non-vegetarians/vegans that

there are delicious meals out there they can cook that don't have meat.

### [Lentil Mushroom Stew Over Mashed Potatoes](#)-Minimalist

Baker This is a hearty winter dish that reminds me of shepherd's pie; it's another dish that holds up so well without the meat. I always put some garlicky sauteed kale on the side for some added green goodness.

## 5) Broccoli

One cup of [cooked broccoli provides 54%](#) of your recommended Vitamin C content, packing as much of a nutritional punch as an orange. Vitamin C supports cellular defense against pathogens (just a fancy word for germs) by enhancing white blood cell activity and the production of interferons which are responsible for initiating protective defenses. Broccoli has an extremely impressive nutritional profile; not only is it high in Vitamin C, it's also high in fiber, Vitamin A, potassium, and protein. Plus it's got antioxidants and phytochemicals which can help to neutralize those yucky free radicals we're exposed to daily.

Want to cover all your Vitamin C in one delicious meal? I highly recommend [Crispy Orange Ginger Tofu with Broccoli](#) from Connoisseursveg. If you're not sure about the tofu, give my article [Tofu: You're Doing It Wrong](#) a read for some tips and tricks to make it delicious. Or just sub in whatever protein you like.

## 6) Chips & Salsa

A bowl of homemade salsa with some crispy tortilla chips might be one of my favorite snacks ever. There are endless varieties of salsa recipes on the internet, from [classic restaurant-style salsa](#) to [mango salsa](#). Whichever recipe you choose, make sure a good amount of tomatoes are on the ingredient list. Tomatoes are rock stars when it comes to waking up the immune system; [scientific evidence](#) shows tomatoes contain a powerful antioxidant called lycopene which can help lower risks of certain types of cancer, improve heart health, and protect healthy cells from being damaged. Snack away, my friends!

## 7) Cocoa

A cup of good quality cocoa on a cold winter day feels like a decadent treat but did you know it also increases your antioxidant intake? [Studies show](#) that cocoa consumption is good for cardiovascular health, brain function, cancer prevention, and stimulates immune and inflammatory system responses. So if you're somewhere in the world where the weather is getting chilly, put on some comfy clothes, mix up a batch of hot cocoa, sit in front of whatever makes you feel good (a favorite TV show, a lit Christmas tree), and sip away. Not feeling the cocoa? A bar of dark chocolate with at least 75% cocoa does the trick as well!

## 8) Chia Seeds

These little nutrient-packed seeds are buzzing all over the internet and for good reason. Chia seeds, less commonly known as *Salvia Hispanica*, were a common crop used in ancient Mesoamerican cultures-Aztecs and Mayans-for food and medicine. Chia seeds are so good for you! They're full of antioxidants, most importantly polyphenolic compounds, which scavenge free radicals and reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Studies even show that compounds in chia seeds are capable of completely [deactivating certain free radicals](#) that damage the body. Most impressively, just two tablespoons of chia seeds has 11 grams of fiber, 4 grams of protein, and even higher amounts of other nutrients. You don't need to eat much to reap the benefits.

You can sprinkle chia seeds over salads, add them to homemade bread, or use them as an egg substitute (1 tbsp. chia seeds + 3 tbsp. water = 1 egg). For some more good ideas on how to incorporate chia seeds into your diet, go to [Healthline.com](https://www.healthline.com) and see all the great ideas they've got listed for you.

I like to eat chia seeds in chocolate chia pudding. Find an air-tight container and throw in 1/2 a cup of chia seeds, a tbsp. of cocoa powder (we already know about the health benefits there), 1 1/2 cups dairy-free milk (I use almond but coconut makes a creamier pudding), 1 tbsp. maple syrup, and 1 tsp. vanilla extract. Mix all the ingredients well and throw in the fridge overnight. This pretty much just tastes like chocolate pudding and it's such a healthy and filling snack. It took me a little bit of playing around with the ingredients to find my

perfect pudding. You might like yours less sweet, more chocolate-y, creamier, etc.; don't be afraid to change up the ingredient amounts.

## 9) Chamomile Tea

From matcha to green, tea is full of amino acids, Vitamin C, and catechins to help strengthen the immune system. You know what else strengthens the immune system? A good night's sleep. And chamomile tea is great for that.

Chamomile tea is commonly regarded as a “sleepy time” tea or “calming” tea. The reason is that it's got an [abundance of an antioxidant called apigenin](#) which binds to receptors in the brain to help decrease anxiety and insomnia.

So go make yourself a nice, calming cup of chamomile tea and get in some good pillow time. Your body will thank you for it.

**T**here are a multitude of studies that show there is a strong relationship between a healthy diet and a healthy immune system. And with the number of delicious options out there, not limited to the 9 in this list, why not give some of them a try? We might not be able to control the craziness in the world, but we can take control of our diets.

Stay safe and healthy and start snacking!