

21

BEST FOODS FOR SURVIVING WINTER

Sports nutritionist *Anita Bean* picks the cold season ingredients every cyclist should stock to keep the wheels turning and the bugs at bay

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uring winter we're more susceptible to bugs and illnesses — and there's nothing more frustrating than missing training because of a cold or flu. It can hinder your riding plans and mentally drain you of the motivation that's hard enough to maintain through the cold, dark months even while fit and well. The good news is that moderate, regular exercise and a healthy diet can increase your immunity. The bad news is that intense exercise can depress immune cell function, making your body more vulnerable to bugs in the hour or so after a tough training session. Fortunately, there are plenty of foods that will help you stay ahead of those germs and bolster your defences. Here are 21 of the best...



SPINACH

Spinach — along with broccoli and kale — is packed full of flavonoids which are thought to have anti-viral, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Research from the University of Auckland, New Zealand, indicates that flavonoids can significantly cut the risk of catching colds and coughs. It's also high in vitamin K, which is believed to have anti-inflammatory properties.

Eat it: Add a handful to frittatas and omelettes, or combine with onions, garlic, ginger, curry paste, tomatoes and chickpeas for a warming curry.



YOGHURT

Live yoghurt naturally contains lots of probiotics that help increase the number of good bacteria in your gut — important because gut bacteria protect you from infections and produce chemicals that regulate appetite, mood and general wellbeing. Much of your immune system is actually in your gastrointestinal tract: cells lining the gut are responsible for producing antibodies that fight off bacteria and viruses. 'Friendly' bacteria can also alleviate the symptoms of conditions such as IBS (irritable bowel syndrome).

Eat it: Add fresh fruit, nuts, seeds and granola for a filling breakfast or post-ride snack, or top curries and daals with a generous dollop.



WINTER WARMER

CHICKPEAS WITH SPINACH AND SWEET POTATOES

Serves 2

- 1 tbsp light olive or rapeseed oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 1 red pepper, deseeded and chopped
- 2 sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 2cm chunks
- 400g (14oz) can chopped tomatoes
- 250ml (8floz) vegetable stock
- 400g (14oz) can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 125g (4oz) fresh spinach, washed and trimmed
- 50g (2oz) Cheddar, grated

1. Heat the oil in a non-stick pan, add

- the onion, garlic and red pepper, and cook over a moderate heat for five minutes.
- 2. Add the sweet potatoes, chopped tomatoes, vegetable stock and chickpeas, stir then bring to the boil. Lower the heat and simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- 3. Stir in the spinach, cover and continue cooking for a few minutes until the spinach is wilted. Add some grated cheese and serve.

■ Per serving: 557kcal, 24g protein, 19g fat (7g saturates), 63g carbs (15g total sugars), 17g fibre

GINGER

This pungent root is loaded with gingerol volatile oils that have potent anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties. They inhibit the formation of inflammatory cytokines — chemical messengers of the immune system. Ginger also contains 'sesquiterpenes', which target rhinoviruses, a common family of viruses.

Eat it: Sore throat? Make a soothing tea by steeping a thumb-sized piece of fresh ginger (sliced) in boiling water for 10 to 15 minutes. Add honey to taste.



ALMONDS

One study on almonds showed that naturally occurring chemicals found in the skin of the nut can increase the body's ability to fight off viruses, including those that cause flu and the common cold.

Eat it: Add to flapjacks, stir into granola, scatter over salads, or whizz with equal quantities of dates for energy bars.



BLUEBERRIES

Blueberries contain high levels of flavonoids, compounds with antioxidant properties that can help support the immune system.

Eat it: Cook fresh or frozen berries in a saucepan with a splash of water and a little honey for a few minutes until soft, for a delicious sauce to pour over porridge.



CLEMENTINES

Clementines, like all citrus fruit, are high in vitamin C, which plays a role in the production of white blood cells and immune cells. As an antioxidant, the vitamin helps protect body cells against oxidative stress and inflammation.

Eat it: Toss clementine segments with rocket, diced avocado, red onion and cubes of feta for a bright and fresh winter salad.

Do you need supplements over winter?

Sports endocrinologist Dr Nicky Keay (health4performance.co.uk) makes the case for vitamin D

Over winter — and during the Christmas holidays in particular — keeping nutrition on track isn't easy, so get the basics right: combine all the main food groups, protein, carbs, fats and fresh fruit and veg, and keep well hydrated. Provided you have these basics sorted, you shouldn't need supplements — with one exception: vitamin D. While sunlight is in short supply, we can't produce enough — even if you walked around naked outside all winter, it wouldn't suffice! Vital for bone health and muscle and immune function, vitamin D is present in fatty fish and some dairy products, but not in large enough quantities. Hence, I recommend taking a Sports Informed (batch tested) vitamin D supplement over the winter. In a study earlier this year, dancers who'd taken vitamin D over the winter were able to jump higher and sustained fewer injuries. Other studies have shown that athletes with good levels of vitamin D over the winter contract fewer illnesses. There really are solid reasons to put "quality vitamin D supplement" on your Christmas list!



BRAZIL NUTS

Brazils are a good source of selenium, an essential mineral with powerful antioxidant properties that lowers the oxidative stress associated with chronic inflammation, while activating enzymes that fire up your immune system.

Eat it: Chop and add to salads, or combine in a food processor with chickpeas, cumin, paprika, egg and coriander to make veggie burgers.



CHERRIES

Their rich red colour comes from anthocyanins, which have powerful anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Studies have shown that concentrated cherry juice can reduce muscle soreness after intense exercise and, being a source of melatonin, promotes restful sleep.

Eat it: Blend frozen pitted cherries with banana, honey and milk or yoghurt for a delicious recovery drink.



TEA

Green and black teas contain high levels of compounds known as catechins and epicatechins. In a Harvard University study, people who drank five cups a day of black tea for two weeks had 10 times more virus-fighting interferon in their blood than others who drank a placebo. The amino acid responsible for this immune boost, L-theanine, is abundant in both black and green tea.

Drink it: Brew for three to five minutes for the optimal antioxidant intake.



AVOCADOS

Rich in vitamin E, a potent antioxidant that scavenges free radicals and protects cells from oxidative damage, avocados are also loaded with healthy monounsaturated fat.

Eat it: Mash with salt, pepper and pile on toast, or layer with baby spinach, salsa and scrambled eggs in a wrap.

TURMERIC

Turmeric contains curcumin, the active ingredients that gives this earthy spice its bright yellow colour. Rich in antioxidants, it is believed to reduce inflammation and fever, making it a good addition to food or drink when you're feeling off. In research at the University of South Carolina, curcumin reduced muscle inflammation by more than 20 per cent within 24 hours of an endurance ride.

Eat it: Add turmeric to curries, spice rubs and marinades, or whisk with ground cinnamon, ginger and honey into warm milk (ideally with a milk frother) for a golden latte.



GARLIC

The active ingredient, and the one responsible for garlic's powerful odour, is allicin, which fights infection and bacteria. In one study, researchers gave 146 people either a placebo or a garlic supplement for 12 weeks; the garlic-takers were two-thirds less likely to catch a cold. Consider a clove or capsule as a daily dose. Want to avoid garlic breath? — consume with fennel, parsley, raw apples or green tea.

Eat it: Enliven salsa or guacamole with crushed garlic, or fry with onions as a base for stews, soups and curries. Don't cook over a high heat longer than 30 seconds, otherwise you'll lose the beneficial compounds. Cook only until it turns fragrant.



WINTER WARMER

ULTIMATE VEGETABLE SOUP

Serves 2

1 tbsp light olive or rapeseed oil
1 onion, finely sliced
1–2 garlic cloves, crushed
1 carrot, sliced
1 small parsnip, diced
600ml (1 pint) vegetable stock (2tsp vegetable bouillon)
1 bay leaf
50g (2oz) green beans, topped, tailed and halved
125g (4oz) green leafy veg, e.g. spinach, kale or cabbage
A small handful basil leaves, roughly torn
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Heat the olive oil in a heavy-based saucepan over a moderate heat. Add

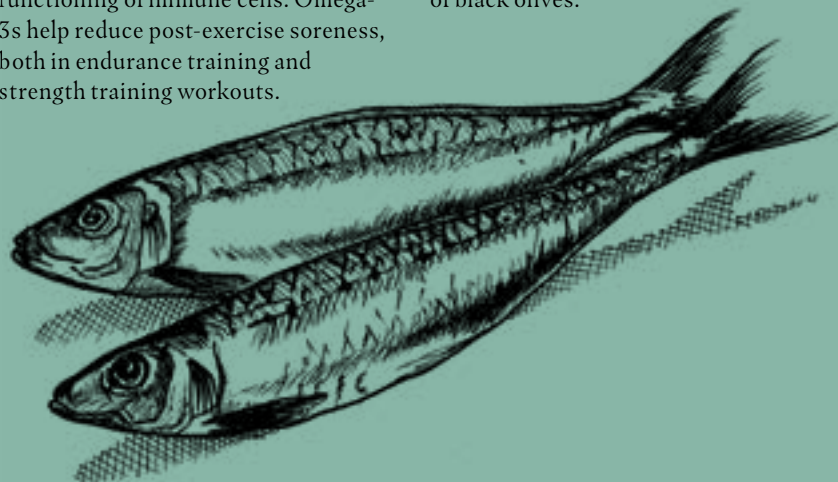
the onion and cook gently for about five minutes until softened.
2. Add the garlic, carrots and parsnips to the pan and continue to cooking over a moderate heat for five minutes, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables soften.
3. Add the stock and bay leaf and bring to the boil. Simmer for 10 minutes, add the beans and greens and cook for a further five minutes.
4. Remove and discard the bay leaf. Liquidise the soup using a blender. Stir in the basil and season with salt and freshly ground pepper.

■ Per serving: 176kcal, 5g protein, 8g fat (1g saturates), 16g carbs (10g total sugars), 10g fibre

SARDINES

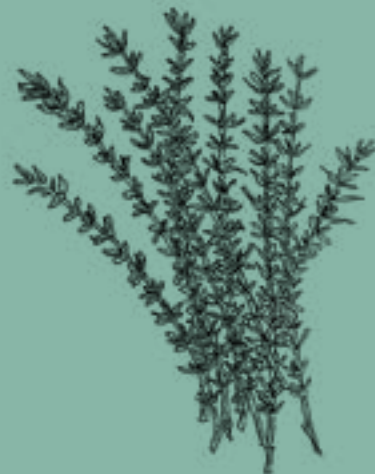
Sardines are a rich source of omega-3 fats, which not only help prevent illness by reducing inflammation but, according to a study at Michigan State University, can also enhance the functioning of immune cells. Omega-3s help reduce post-exercise soreness, both in endurance training and strength training workouts.

Eat it: Mash tinned sardines with mayo and lemon juice, then pile on toast, or mix a tin of sardines (chopped) with cooked spaghetti, olive oil, garlic, tinned chopped tomatoes and a handful of black olives.



THYME

Rich in the powerful oil thymol, this herb has potent antiseptic and antibiotic properties, which make it a popular remedy for coughs, throat and chest infections and bronchitis. It contains flavonoids that relax muscles in the trachea linked to coughing and inflammation. **Eat it:** Thyme enhances the flavour of roasted vegetables such as carrots, swede, butternut squash and potatoes. To make a cough-soothing tea, add two teaspoons of crushed fresh or dried leaves in a cup of hot water and leave to infuse for around 10 minutes.



PUMPKIN SEEDS

One of the richest sources of zinc, crucial for the healthy development of white blood cells that detect and destroy bugs, adequate zinc intake helps prevent the risk of infections in both the gut and the respiratory system. **Eat it:** Roasting pumpkin seeds transforms them into a super-tasty, crunchy snack perfect for munching on the go or sprinkling on salads, soups and dips. Simply toss in olive oil (with a little salt, black pepper, chilli powder or cayenne pepper if you like) and roast in a 200°C/180°C fan oven for 10 minutes.



WINTER WARMER

RED PEPPERS WITH PUY LENTILS

Serves 2

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1-2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 250g pack cooked puy lentils
- 75g (3oz) baby plum tomatoes, halved
- 50g (2oz) goat's cheese, crumbled
- 2 Romano or red peppers
- A few fresh basil leaves, roughly torn

1. Heat the oven to 190°C/fan 170°C/170°C fan /Gas 5. Heat one tablespoon of the oil in a heavy-based pan and sauté the onions for five minutes. Add the garlic and continue cooking for another minute. Stir in the

lentils, tomatoes and goat's cheese and remove from the heat.
2. Cut the peppers in half lengthways, keeping the stalk attached, and remove the seeds. Brush the outsides with the remaining olive oil, then place them, skin-side-down, in a roasting tin. Spoon the lentil mixture into the four pepper halves. Cover loosely with foil. Bake in the oven for 20-25 minutes, or until the peppers are just tender. Scatter over the basil leaves.

■ Per serving: 447kcal, 21g protein, 20g fat (7g saturates), 40g carbs (14g total sugars), 12g fibre

CARROTS

Carrots are crammed with beta-carotene, a pigment the body converts into vitamin A — essential for healthy skin and mucous membranes, night vision and maintenance of the immune system. Just one medium carrot can provide you with more than 100 per

cent of your recommended daily intake of vitamin A. **Eat it:** Slice lengthways, toss with olive oil, dried thyme and salt, roast in the oven for 20 minutes, then mix with rice or quinoa, chickpeas, toasted pecans and a squeeze of lemon juice.



SWEET POTATOES

Sweet potatoes are rich in beta-carotene, a phytochemical that gives the flesh its orange colour. Beta-carotene plays a role in the immune system as well, as it helps maintain the cells lining your airways, digestive system and urinary tract — the body's first defence against infection. **Eat it:** Mix grated sweet potatoes, carrots and onions with plain flour and beaten eggs to make tasty latkes.



MANGOES

Mangoes contain two of the key nutrients needed for a healthy immune system: vitamin C and beta-carotene. These vitamins work together to mop up free radicals and prevent damage to body cells. **Eat it:** The best way to eat it is to slice the fruit lengthways into two pieces, avoiding the stone in the middle and then to score the flesh into a criss-cross pattern before turning each half inside out.



CHICKPEAS

Chickpeas contain fructans, a type of prebiotic that feeds the friendly bacteria of the gut and benefits the immune system. A 125g serving of cooked chickpeas gives you 15 per cent of your daily requirement for zinc, a vital nutrient for your immune system. **Eat it:** Combine tinned chickpeas with olive oil, ground cumin, smoked paprika, salt and pepper and roast them in the oven (190°C/170°C fan/gas 3) for about 25 minutes for a crunchy snack.



EGGS

Eggs are one of the few foods that are a natural source of vitamin D, with one egg providing nearly one-third of your daily requirement. Vitamin D deficiency (which affects one in five people in the UK) may increase your chances of upper respiratory infections, according to research published in the *British Medical Journal*. Scientists have found that your immune cells have vitamin D receptors, which are important for regulating your body's natural defence mechanisms. **Eat it:** Knock up a simple frittata by mixing beaten eggs with a handful of baby spinach, mushrooms or red peppers; pour into a hot frying pan and cook until almost set, then pop under a hot grill until puffed up and golden.



PEPPERS

Red peppers pack a more powerful vitamin C punch — crucial for repairing connective tissue and cartilage — than citrus fruit. Not getting enough vitamin C can impair your immunity and make you more susceptible to infections. While the jury is still out on whether or not vitamin C can truly prevent a cold, a 2017 review of research suggests getting at least 100-200mg/day (equivalent to one red pepper) can help stave off respiratory infections — or at the very least help reduce the severity and length of symptoms. **Eat it:** Add sliced peppers to sandwiches, salads and stir-fries, or stuff halved Romano red peppers with cooked puy lentils, chopped fresh tomatoes and goat's cheese. Bake in a hot oven for 20 minutes (see recipe).