

Eating “The Rainbow” and Other Food Tips for Uncertain Times

COVID-19 and cancer call for comfort food, but experts say baking with whole-food ingredients and eating mostly plants will better support your immune system.

June 30, 2020 By Diana Mapes

Schedules are screwy, the news is extra stressful. Flour, toilet paper and normalcy are in short supply and there’s a deadly virus going around that might do nothing or just might kill you. We’re living a different reality these days. It’s scary and uncertain.

Who doesn’t feel like stress-eating an entire loaf of garlic cheese bread or quart of Chocolate Pandemacadamia Crunch?

That’s not the healthiest route, as you likely know. But what is? Are there foods that keep the immune system strong? Is it OK to bake (and eat) all those starchy carbs? How do we eat healthy when we can’t get to the store and we’re down to our last can of quarantine beans?

We turned to the nutrition and health experts at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center for practical tips on how to eat through the current pandemic — or any time of upheaval — without losing any of the important nutrients needed to fight disease or prevent gaining “the COVID-19” (pounds).

Dietitian [Kate Ueland](#) counsels patients at Seattle Cancer Care Alliance on what to eat during and after treatment. She also develops cancer-fighting recipes for [Cook For Your Life](#), a healthy-cooking website [acquired](#) last year by Fred Hutch. As a member of the Hutch’s [Greenlee Lab](#), she conducts cancer prevention research through the CFYL site, which offers hundreds of healthy recipes — along with cooking demos — for people touched by cancer.

We sat down at the virtual table with Ueland to discuss food, nutrition, disease and our disjointed eating habits during this uncertain time.

First and foremost, she said it’s important to acknowledge we’re going through an incredibly difficult — and stressful — time.

“Be kind to yourself and give yourself a little bit of grace during these times, or any time really that’s problematic or troubling,” she said. “Remember this is not forever. It’s a moment in time.”

She also shared practical and scientific insights on how to keep your immune system healthy by eating lots of fiber to support the gastrointestinal tract, where much of our body's health-promoting microbiome is housed. Eating mostly plants — vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes — is what will support immunity, she said.

“You don't have to be a vegan, but three quarters of your plate should be plant-based foods,” she said.

Her favorite tip? Eat the rainbow, i.e., pack your meals with a variety of colorful fruits and veggies, including skins and peels, which are loaded with fiber and an array of important phytonutrients that help keep your immune system strong.

Processed foods — though convenient — are full of empty calories that don't give you much in return, she said. By relying too heavily on processed foods, we miss out on a “multitude of nutrients and fiber that help to keep our immune system healthy and robust.”

“Processed foods can have their place at the table, but I encourage people to focus on consuming whole foods the majority of the time,” she said.

Choosing brown rice over white, rolled oats over instant and always eating grains and cereals in the most “whole form possible” is a much better choice if you're trying to keep your body healthy and strong, she said.

Bake with whole, not processed, ingredients

Ueland offered tips on how to prep for mealtime success, how to use canned foods without feeling guilty and how to pack pasta dishes, one-bowl meals and baked goods with whole-food ingredients that strengthen immunity.

She even validated the country's current obsession with baking.

“I support people baking at home,” she said. “It's a lovely way to control what's going into the foods that we're consuming. Start with 100% whole wheat flour and use sliced or shredded apples, carrots or different kinds of berries in lieu of refined sugars.”

Folding fruits, berries and other healthy ingredients (like nuts, seeds or even finely chopped kale!) into baked goods increases the phytonutrient content of the food, she said. And that, in turn, helps your body and immune system fend off disease-causing invaders like bacteria, fungi, toxins and viruses, including this new coronavirus.

Her favorite science-based secret ingredient?

“I always add ground flaxseed into whatever I'm cooking,” she said. “It helps increase the fiber content and it provides that extra little boost of omega 3 fatty acids which we know help to support a healthy immune system.”

Watch the full interview [here](#), then check out these easy CFYL recipes for two healthy breakfast muffins, one with [sweet potato](#) and the other with [zucchini, cheddar and quinoa](#). Are we making you hungry? You'll find hundreds of other cancer-fighting recipes on the [Cook for Your Life](#) website.

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