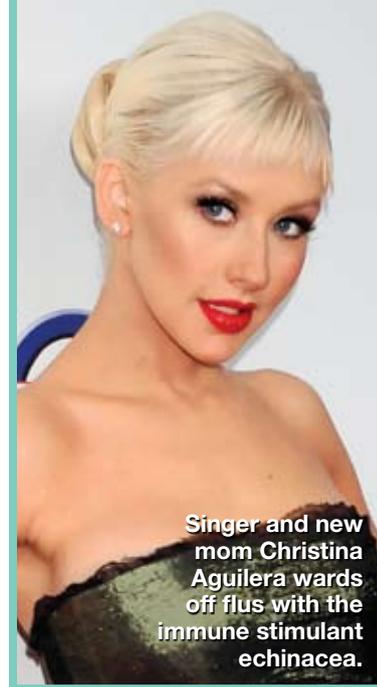




Busy mom and TV host Heidi Klum bolsters her immune system with a daily vitamin-packed energy-enhancing drink.



Actress Kirsten Dunst keeps her energy at its highest with a daily dose of vitamins.



Singer and new mom Christina Aguilera wards off flus with the immune stimulant echinacea.

Force field

Arm yourself against winter colds and flu with these sure-fire immunity boosters

February may be the month when love reigns supreme, but no matter how hot you look in that little red dress this Valentine's Day, nothing can throw a wrench in your romantic evening faster than sniffing and sneezing all over your half of dessert.

"February is probably the worst time for flu," says Dr. Eleanor Fish, a professor at the University of Toronto's department of immunology. "But if you have a robust immune system, you'll be better equipped to deal with any infection you're exposed to."

That may be cold comfort if you're already dealing with flu symptoms, but it's great news otherwise, because you still have time to incorporate a few important pre-emptive measures.

Back to basics

First off, you can't beat a seasonal flu

shot. "[It's the] one thing everybody should do," says Dr. Fish. "There are 30,000 less visits to the emergency room solely due to the vaccine."

When it comes to nutrition, it turns out that your grandmother did know best. The age-old traditions of administering chicken soup and nightmare-inducing spoonfuls of cod liver oil were right on the money. "Common sense prevails," says Dr. Fish. "So if you get zapped by every infection under the sun, you might be someone with a vitamin D deficiency."

Her advice: "Increase your intake of cod liver oil, which is the best source of vitamin D." If you simply can't bear its unpleasant taste, try the A-list approach to optimum health with E-Boost – a daily immunity-enhancing drink chock-full of vitamins and minerals. It's a favourite with

beautiful blonds Heidi Klum and Kirsten Dunst.

Food for thought

It seems the old adage "You are what you eat" rings true for our immune systems. Eat healthily and you'll stay healthy, says Dr. Amanda Guthrie, a Toronto-based naturopathic doctor. "Eating sugars, honey, pop, fruit juice, alcohol or refined flours (bagels, bread, pasta and pastries) significantly reduces the ability of white blood cells to kill bacteria or viruses," she explains.

During these frigid winter months – when hibernating with a plateful of brownies seems more appealing than fresh carrot sticks and a trip to the gym – Dr. Guthrie's advice is to avoid temptation. "Stay away from sugar and eat a nutrient-dense diet consisting of plenty of vegetables and fruits to provide your body with immune-supporting nutrients like vitamins A, C, E and zinc." Eating healthy protein, such as lean chicken, turkey, seeds, beans and tofu, is also essential for building strong immunity.

And then there's echinacea – highly touted for its ability to knock out the flu before the flu knocks you out – and a lifesaver for singers like Christina Aguilera, who swears by it. However, it's only effective if taken when you first feel symptoms of a cold or flu coming on. Plus, the herbal remedy loses its effectiveness

with prolonged use. "It's not something everyone should take for long periods of time," notes Dr. Guthrie.

If you do experience early flu symptoms, the best way to send them packing is quite simple. "Stay home from work and get plenty of sleep," advises Dr. Guthrie. When your body is in a restful state, your cells have time to regenerate. "Drink plenty of water and herbal teas. [A hot cup of ginger tea is] a traditional remedy for warming the body, which uses high temperature to kill invading bacteria and viruses," she adds.

Mind yourself

Keeping your spirits up, getting a good night's sleep and sticking to your new year's workout resolution are also great ways to keep yourself in fighting form. "Many people don't realize that your thoughts and emotions have an impact on your immune system," explains Dr. Guthrie. "The hormones released when you feel stressed directly suppress the immune system [so] that the greater your stress, the weaker your immune system."

Be sure to surround yourself with friends and family whom you find supportive and take part in a relaxing activity like yoga or meditation.

This winter, put your health first with these immunity-boosting measures. You – and your Valentine's date – will be thankful you did. **H**

Immune system boosters

- Get your z's: eight hours a night for optimum health
- Take "winter" vitamins: A, C, E and zinc keep germs at bay
- Get moving: regular exercise balances blood-sugar levels for a healthy immune system
- Relax: stress weakens your defences so try a yoga or meditation class
- Be social: interaction boosts immune function
- Inject to protect: make your annual flu shot a must