

What to Eat When You're Sick to Support Healing and Ease Symptoms

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Different symptoms require specific food strategies: hydration comes first during stomach bugs, bland carbs help with upset stomachs, while warm liquids and fiber aid constipation
- › Bone broth and warm teas help with congestion, while both cold foods and warm soups soothe sore throats. Raw honey acts as a natural cough suppressant
- › Bone broth offers collagen and amino acids for tissue repair, while garlic provides antiviral and antibacterial effects that reduce cold and flu severity
- › Coconut water restores lost electrolytes without irritating your stomach, and ginger effectively stops nausea while calming your digestive tract
- › Eat small, frequent amounts rather than large meals when sick, and use high-water fruits and vegetables like watermelon and cucumbers as hydration alternatives

When you're down with a virus or infection, your need for nutrients, fluids, and energy skyrockets. But appetite usually goes in the opposite direction. That mismatch is what delays recovery and, in some cases, it's what lands people in serious trouble. This is where your food choices come in. When you're under the weather, eating becomes about function, not flavor.

The right foods support immune response, soothe irritation, repair tissue, and help you bounce back faster. The wrong ones drag your system down, worsen symptoms, or stop healing in its tracks. Your body is always working behind the scenes to heal, but when you're sick, it needs you to work with it. That means knowing what to eat based on your symptoms and giving your system the building blocks it's asking for.

Different Symptoms Call for Different Food Strategies

A practical guide in TIME focuses on what to eat and what to avoid, when you're sick with specific symptoms like nausea, diarrhea, sore throat, or heartburn.¹ Rather than giving one-size-fits-all advice, it tailors food strategies based on how your body is reacting. Whether you're vomiting, coughing, or constipated, the goal is to nourish your body in ways that don't aggravate your symptoms but instead support your recovery.

- **Hydration comes first, especially during a stomach bug** — When you're vomiting or dealing with diarrhea, you lose not just water, but electrolytes — minerals like **sodium and potassium** that your body needs to function.

Dehydration triggers headaches, dizziness, and fatigue. To prevent this, start by sipping coconut water or broth in small spoonfuls — not large gulps — which are easier on your gut. High-water fruits and vegetables like cucumbers, melons, and oranges are also smart hydration boosters when plain water feels unappealing.²

- **Bland carbs are your best friends when your stomach is upset** — Once you're able to keep fluids down, foods that contain soluble fiber, such as bananas, applesauce, and rice, help bulk up stool without irritating your system. The key is to eat small amounts frequently rather than large meals that could make nausea or diarrhea worse.

Constipation Relief Needs Fiber, but Timing Is Everything

For **constipation**, consider a gradual increase in dietary fiber — overloading too quickly will worsen bloating and discomfort. You should only consume fiber-rich foods once your gut is stable enough to handle fiber safely. That's the fiber paradox: fiber is necessary, but if you consume it when your gut is unhealthy, it makes symptoms worse. Start slow and drink plenty of water to help fiber move smoothly through your system.

- **Warm beverages help get things moving** — Warm liquids help stimulate bowel movements, which is why some people rely on coffee or tea first thing in the morning.³ The warmth, not necessarily the caffeine, helps activate the colon.
- **Whole fruits and legumes offer lasting support** — Once your system adjusts, fruits like prunes and fiber-rich legumes become valuable tools for keeping digestion regular. But again, the transition has to be slow and mindful to avoid making constipation worse.

Choose easy-to-digest foods like whole fruit and white rice to start. As your gut heals, begin layering in starches like peeled potatoes or cooked squash. Later, move toward root vegetables and, finally, more **fibrous foods**.

When You're Congested, Comfort Foods Aren't Just Comforting

Broth-based soups hydrate and deliver nutrients without requiring much digestion. Their warmth also helps open nasal passages, making it easier to breathe when you're congested from a cold or the flu.⁴

- **Soothing teas are a smart addition** — Ginger or peppermint tea calms your stomach, hydrates and helps clear sinus buildup. These herbs also have mild antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory effects, making them useful allies during upper respiratory infections.
- **Cold or warm foods both help a sore throat** — Homemade freezer pops made with fruit juice, grass fed yogurt (choose homemade, not **commercial varieties**) and smoothies have a cooling effect on **sore throats**. But warm soups also soothe pain

and add nutrients when you're not eating much else. For older children and adults, saltwater gargles (1/2 teaspoon in 8 ounces of warm water) also reduce throat swelling.⁵

- **Raw honey is healing** — Honey is known for its antibacterial properties and has long been used in wound care. Tea with honey helps reduce throat inflammation and suppress coughing. According to the Mayo Clinic, honey coats your throat and acts as a natural cough suppressant that's especially helpful at night.⁶ Try stirring honey into warm tea or taking a spoonful directly.

Avoiding Trigger Foods Is Key When You're Dealing with Heartburn

Heartburn is often made worse by acidic, fatty, or spicy foods. Tomatoes, citrus, caffeine, chocolate, and peppermint are common top offenders. Eating these relaxes the valve between your stomach and esophagus, letting acid creep upward and cause that burning sensation.⁷

- **Most heartburn is caused by too little stomach acid, not too much** — In addition to optimizing your **mitochondrial function**, consuming hydrogen-rich foods, such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and proteins, and chloride-rich foods, such as salt, celery, and olives, provides the dietary sources for your body to make stomach acid. Consuming sauerkraut or cabbage juice will also stimulate your body to produce stomach acid.
- **Timing matters just as much as what you eat** — Eating close to bedtime or lying down right after a meal increases the odds of reflux. Eat dinner earlier and stay upright for at least an hour after eating.

Specific Foods Offer Immune and Recovery Benefits When You're Sick

Whether you're dealing with a cold, flu, nausea or general fatigue, certain foods are easy to tolerate but still powerful in their effects. These include bone broth, garlic, coconut water, ginger, raw honey, fruits, leafy greens, and grass fed yogurt. Each of these foods has a beneficial impact on recovery, energy production and inflammation control when you're sick.⁸

- **Bone broth offers collagen and amino acids that help repair tissue** — It's easy on your digestive system while supplying building blocks for gut lining restoration and immune cell production. Because it's hot and liquid-based, **bone broth** also loosens nasal congestion and soothes your throat.
- **Garlic has proven antiviral and antibacterial effects** — Garlic reduces the severity of colds and flu.⁹ Aged garlic extract in particular has been shown to enhance immune function¹⁰ — it's a well-documented example of food acting as medicine. **Garlic** works by stimulating immune cells and possibly reducing viral replication.
- **Coconut water restores lost electrolytes without irritating your stomach** — If you're vomiting, sweating, or running a fever, you're not just losing fluid — you're also losing potassium and sodium. Coconut water replaces both and adds a touch of natural sugar for quick energy. Unlike synthetic sports drinks, it's free of dyes and additives.
- **Ginger stops nausea in its tracks and soothes your gut** — Ginger has anti-nausea effects. It **calms your digestive tract** and prevents spasms that trigger vomiting. You can steep fresh ginger as tea to get the benefits.

What to Eat and Drink to Speed Healing When You're Sick

If you're dealing with a cold, stomach bug, sore throat, or just feeling wiped out, the goal is to reduce stress on your system while giving it the fuel it needs to fight back. Food and hydration aren't optional; they're how you help your body repair and restore energy. But it's not just about eating anything.

What matters is choosing the right things for your symptoms and knowing how to adjust as your body heals. Below are five practical steps to take when you're sick and want to get better faster, without worsening your symptoms or draining your energy further:

- 1. Start with hydration, but sip, don't gulp** — If you're throwing up, sweating, or dealing with diarrhea, you're not just losing water. You're also losing electrolytes like sodium and potassium, which your body needs to function. Instead of gulping water, take small sips of coconut water, diluted fruit juice, or warm bone broth throughout the day. This helps you stay hydrated without triggering more nausea or stomach cramps.
- 2. Use food to match your symptoms, not fight them** — If your stomach is upset, go with bland foods like rice, applesauce, or bananas. These are easy to digest and help stabilize your gut. If you're battling a sore throat, soft cold foods like grass fed yogurt or homemade popsicles made from fruit juice are soothing, while raw honey stirred into tea works as a natural cough suppressant.
- 3. Add healing ingredients that actually work** — Use garlic for its antiviral properties. Add fresh ginger to tea or chew on a piece to settle your stomach. Spoon raw honey into warm water or tea to coat your throat and reduce inflammation. These are evidence-backed ways to support immune function and ease your symptoms without relying on over-the-counter drugs.
- 4. Eat small amounts — don't force big meals** — If you're not hungry, that's OK, but skipping food for too long will leave you weaker. Even just a few spoonfuls of broth or a banana help keep your energy stable and prevent further fatigue or dizziness.
- 5. Use fruits and vegetables as a hydration bonus** — When plain water doesn't sound appealing, use high-water fruits and veggies like watermelon, cucumbers, berries, or citrus slices. These give you both fluids and essential nutrients in one bite. It's an easy solution when you're too tired to cook or eat a full meal, and it keeps you on track toward recovery without overloading your system.

FAQs About What to Eat When You're Sick

Q: What are the best foods to eat when you're sick?

A: Focus on simple, nourishing options that are easy on your system. Bone broth, bananas, rice, applesauce, grass fed yogurt, and cooked vegetables provide energy without overwhelming your digestion.

Q: What should I eat if I have a sore throat or cough?

A: Choose soft, soothing foods like homemade popsicles made from fruit juice, smoothies, or grass fed yogurt. Add raw honey to warm tea to calm irritation and reduce coughing. Warm bone broth also helps by easing inflammation and supplying nutrients.

Q: What should I eat to help with nausea or vomiting?

A: Ginger — used in teas or fresh form — is especially helpful for calming your stomach. Sip coconut water or broth slowly to stay hydrated without triggering more nausea.

Q: How do I stay hydrated if I can't drink much?

A: Take small sips of coconut water or warm herbal teas throughout the day. High-water fruits like watermelon, oranges, and cucumbers also count toward your fluid intake and help prevent dehydration.

Q: Are there foods that actually help fight illness?

A: Yes. Garlic supports immune function with antiviral and antibacterial properties. Ginger relieves nausea and soothes your stomach. Raw honey coats your throat and acts as a natural antimicrobial.

Sources and References

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