Simmer Down!

With just a bag of nutritious (and cheap!) ingredients and a little bit of time, you can whip up a steaming pot of soup's healing goodness.

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Your kitchen is the heart of your home, the gathering place for your family, the scene of countless chaotic breakfasts and warming catch-up dinners. But picture this: It can also be your doctor's office and neighborhood pharmacy.

Did you know you have the power to boost your family's immunity, mount a healthy detox, improve your skin and hair, lower your risk of certain diseases and speed up the recovery from a common cold—all with ingredients right out of your own pantry? How? Toss chopped-up veggies in a pot of water and put it on the burner. Then count the ways below that you can benefit your health by eating soup.

Boost your immune system

Do you wait until your fever reaches an all-time high, your nose runs nonstop and your cough strips your throat raw before you reach for relief? Your immune system requires year-round care, not special attention only three days a year, and a warm and hearty soup (or a light and refreshing one) can give your system the TLC it needs.

Ask a nutritionist. Many swear that slowly simmered, clear broth soups boost immunity and are gentle enough on the digestive system to eat every day. Some of the most common ingredients used to make soup are nutritious. Onions, for example, are a sulfur-rich blood cleanser. High-fiber lentils prevent constipation, and the good bacteria in miso, a thick paste made from fermented soybeans and barley or rice malt, promote digestion.

"A healthy mix of different ingredients and a simmering cooking process allow water-soluble vitamins to leach into the cooking water and be retained in the soup," says Mary Hartley, RD, MPH, a nutritionist for caloriecount.com. "Plus, soup is easy to eat for those who have difficulty chewing or swallowing whole foods, or [who have] certain intestinal problems."

Ingredients to try: Cabbage can increase your body's ability to fight infection; ginger aids

digestion; seaweed is a natural cleanser; and mushrooms contain polysaccharides (a type of carbohydrate sugar), sterols (fat-like substances that occur naturally in animals and plants), and vitamins and minerals that strengthen immune function.

Detox your body

If you tend to disregard the latest USDA nutritional advice about how to fill your food plate and instead choose to subsist on cheese and pretzels, a detox is a good way to get back on track. While some Western doctors believe that detoxing isn't necessary because human beings have multiple ways to eliminate toxins (think smog, sugar and alcohol) from the body, Eastern physicians endorse soup- and broth-drinking to flush out the bad stuff.

"In the Eastern traditions," Hartley notes, "fresh broths made with herbs and greens are taken twice a day to cleanse the body of internal and environmental toxins."

To put these Eastern traditions into play for a detoxifying boost, swap out your typical Western lunch or dinner for a homemade, low-sodium soup made of clear broth (no creams or cheeses) with tons of bright-colored veggies.

Ingredients to try: Dandelion and mustard greens add sustenance and vitamins A, B and C, plus calcium, folate and magnesium—all of which help detox the liver, increase circulation, reduce inflammation and replenish your body with lost minerals. Then add dashes of ginger or cilantro to spice things up.

Beautify skin and hair

The multitude of benefits that soup bestows on skin and hair may not be uppermost in people's minds as they stir the liquid goodness in their pots, but what's in the mix does count. "In order to maintain healthy skin, there is no substitute for a balanced diet and plenty of fluids," Hartley says. "That's because skin's integrity depends on a host of different nutrients."

Guess what? Many soups contain most if not all of the key vitamins, antioxidants and essential fatty acids (EFAs) beneficial to bright, glowing skin. Specifically, these include vitamin A (found in dark orange and dark green vegetables); antioxidants found in most veggies and dried beans; and EFAs found in cold water fish and the healthy oils many people include in soup dishes.

"Boost the protein value of this nutrient-rich meal by whisking a raw egg into steaming hot soup or adding finely chopped hard-cooked eggs," Hartley suggests.

What's more, soup can kick-start hair growth, help your body produce natural hair moisturizers and conditioners and boost protein intake to make your hair less brittle and dull.

Ingredients to try: Spinach, carrots, pumpkins and beans are all packed with vitamins and antioxidants. And for EFAs, add fish, nuts and oils such as flaxseed and safflower.

Lower the risks for cancer, heart disease and stroke

No, soup isn't just a cold remedy. The regenerative and therapeutic powers of the ingredients in this meal help relieve problems caused by cancer, heart disease and stroke.

"Scientists believe that a predominantly plant-based diet may provide minerals, vitamins and phytochemicals that can prevent cancers and the inflammation that leads to cardiovascular disease," Hartley says. "Soups that are loaded with vegetables, whole grains and beans provide those nutrients."

Cruciferous vegetables, a.k.a. vegetables in the cabbage family, have long been linked to a decreased risk of cancer. Lab studies show phytochemicals found in veggies can stimulate enzymes in the body that may disarm cancer-causing agents before they damage cells. What's more, other studies suggest that these veggies reduce disease-causing stress and stop the body from being overloaded with dangerous molecules linked to colon, lung, prostate, breast and other cancers. And they're not the only veggies that do so.

In addition, the carotenoids—phytonutrients found in the pigment of dark greens—also stop disease-causing free radicals from harming the body. Garlic, a staple soup ingredient, can protect against stomach cancer and heart disease. And ditto for the plant chemicals found in red foods (such as tomatoes and watermelon). Like whole grains in your soup? If so, brown rice also boasts hundreds of natural compounds that can protect cells and blood vessels, Hartley says.

Ingredients to try: Besides the usual suspects, also reach for these soup-er stars: mustard greens, swiss chard and overachieving whole grains such as corn and bulgur.

Get well faster

Remember the old myth that chicken soup is good for colds? Well, turns out grandma's (or mom's or dad's) chicken soup may be just what the doctor ordered.

"Scientists at the University of Nebraska showed that chicken soup, homemade or canned, can help ease cold symptoms by helping break up congestion and ease nasal and chest secretions," Hartley says. "Plus it may also inhibit inflammation."

How does this magic happen? Well, doctors speculate that the combination of chicken and veggies, especially when they are cooked in water, is what makes chicken soup super effective. Supportive studies show chicken soup stops the movement of white blood cells that stimulate mucus release. When a cold virus strikes the body, large amounts of white blood cells called neutrophils rush to the site of the inflammation. This causes a host of dreaded and dreary symptoms such as a runny nose and chest congestion. Soup may simply interfere with the white blood cells' travel plans. When they stay put, you feel better.

As a bonus, an appetizing bowl of comforting, nourishing soup breaks down congestion and thins mucus. And the convenient, one-pot meal is so easily digested it lets your body devote its energy to fighting infection full force.

Ingredients to try: Clear, low-sodium chicken broth, boneless and skinless chicken breast, plus onions, carrots, parsnips and dill.

Hungry for more? Now that you know what soup can do for your health, stock up on good-for-you ingredients. Here are Hartley's tips: If you buy canned soups, be sure they are low in sodium (less than 400 milligrams per serving); and use fresh vegetables when possible and low-sodium broths as a base. Rinse canned beans under running tap water, and use fewer high sodium ingredients such as salt, soy sauce, bacon, ham and regular canned tomatoes and tomato juice.

Bon appetit!

Creamy Broccoli Soup
Cumin and sea salt bring out this soup's flavors. Despite being uncooked and served cold, this rich, creamy and thick soup is the perfect dish to serve on cold winter nights (or chilly fall evenings).

- 1 cup almonds
- 1 teaspoon agave nectar
- 2 cups chopped broccoli
- 1 avocado, peeled, pitted and chopped
- 1 small garlic clove
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon chopped onion
- 1 teaspoon sea salt1/8 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Put 3 cups water, the almonds and agave in a Vitamix blender. Blend until smooth. Add the broccoli, avocado, garlic, olive oil, onion, salt, cumin and pepper. Blend until the soup is smooth and creamy. Serve immediately, or cover and refrigerate for up to two days.

Makes 4 servings.

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