

Why essential nutrients have never been more essential

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a balanced diet is important not only for physical health, but also mental wellbeing

As the mammoth battle against coronavirus continues, with public health and safety measures now in place to slow the spread of the disease, the importance of healthy eating should not be under-estimated.

That's because nutrition plays a key role in supporting the immune system, and a balanced diet is important not only for physical health, but also mental wellbeing.

The healthiest meals include plenty of vegetables, fruits and wholegrain cereals, beans and other legumes, and smaller portions of meat. Other nutrient-dense foods include dairy products, eggs, fish (particularly oily fish), nuts and seeds.

However, in such challenging times, maintaining a healthy eating regime is not always easy, as acknowledged by the World Health Organisation, which says: "As countries are taking stronger measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, limited access to fresh foods may compromise opportunities to continue eating a healthy and varied diet."

According to the Council for Responsible Nutrition UK (CRN UK), of particular concern is the potential for a deficiency in key micronutrients that support the immune system, including vitamins A and D, B vitamins, vitamin C and the essential minerals and trace elements iron, copper, zinc and selenium.

"Although messages about the importance of a balanced diet and a healthy active lifestyle underpin nutrition advice to the public, now, more than ever, there is also a need for evidence-based scientific advice about the role food supplements play in the provision of essential nutrients," says Professor David Richardson, scientific adviser to CRN UK. "Food supplements have always been part of the strategic dietary advice given to vulnerable groups such as the elderly, women at various life stages, children and adolescents.

"Poor nutritional status is associated with impaired immune function in people of all ages, but particularly those over 60 years of age, so improved nutrition and micronutrient supplementation can help enhance immune responses."

CRN UK says it is therefore important to be aware of the link between good nutrition, essential micronutrients and good health, and the role multivitamin-mineral supplements can play.