“HAVE YOU TRIED vitamin supplements?” It’s a common and universally annoying suggestion made to primary immunodeficiency (PI) patients by any number of well-meaning friends and family members. While the advice is overly simplistic and certainly not a “cure,” the fact is, some nutritional supplements may be helpful when it comes to dealing with disease symptoms and medication side effects. Which ones to choose and how much to take are where recommendations vary. For PI patients considering a nutritional supplement regimen, it’s advisable to consult with their physicians and/or pharmacists first to discuss any possible drug interactions and concerns. For those deciding to peruse the vitamin aisle, here’s a list of some of the most common go-to supplements linked to immune support:

- **Vitamin C** is known as an antioxidant and is commonly used for preventing and treating colds and cold symptoms. Vitamin C is also thought to increase the production of white blood cells. Because the body doesn’t produce or store it, daily intake of vitamin C is essential, and supplements are available in chewable, capsule and liquid form.

- **Zinc** plays an important role in the health of the immune system, specifically related to proper functioning of T cells. Zinc supplements are widely used to treat colds, prevent respiratory infections, boost the immune system and treat certain skin conditions.
  - Ginger root is best known as a remedy for stomach upset and nausea. It can also be used to relieve joint and muscle pain, as well as some symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis.
  - Garlic enjoys a long history of use for boosting the immune system, fighting infections and preventing illness. Some studies support the ability of garlic to suppress certain bacteria, viruses and fungi, including yeast infections and candida.
  - Probiotics are beneficial bacteria cultures that establish a stronghold in the large intestine and benefit health by crowding out harmful bacteria, boosting immune function in the intestine and possibly strengthening the body’s immune system. Long-term use of antibiotics can upset the natural balance in the intestine, and probiotics can help repopulate good bacteria.
  - Fish oil is rich in omega-3 fatty acids and offers wide-ranging health benefits, including lowered blood pressure and decreased risk of heart attack and stroke. Research shows that omega-3 fatty acids reduce inflammation and may help lower the risk of chronic illness such as heart disease, cancer and arthritis. Omega-3 fatty acids are highly concentrated in the brain and appear to be important for cognitive and behavioral function, too.

Should PI patients take supplements? The answer seems to depend upon whom you ask. On the con side, nutritional supplements are not monitored or regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which means that the dose of the active compounds may be inaccurate or sometimes unknown. It also means that they may contain other substances not listed on the label, which could be harmful to individuals with a compromised immune system. On the plus side, many supplements do have ample research supporting the anecdotal evidence of their benefits, and many patients living with chronic illness successfully use vitamins and supplements on a daily basis. The bottom line for those considering a new supplement regimen is to discuss their options with their physician first. It’s also a good idea to keep a health diary to track any positive or adverse reactions and report those findings to their doctor.

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According to the GNC website, zinc is an essential mineral that is a component of more than 300 enzymes needed to repair wounds, maintain fertility in adults and growth in children, synthesize protein, help cells reproduce, preserve vision, boost immunity and protect against free radicals, among other functions. 100 capsules, $3.99; GNC.com

**GNC Zinc 30 MG**

**Emergen-C Immune +**

This popular supplement is said to support the immune system with nutrients, including vitamins D and B, plus a proprietary complex with beta-glucans and arabinogalactans. It also contains electrolytes (potassium, sodium, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and key antioxidants), vitamin C, zinc and manganese. $11.99; Available at local drugstores and at drugstore.com

**Sundown Naturals Odorless Garlic**

Sundown Naturals Odorless Garlic provides the goodness of pure garlic oil, minus the unpleasant aftertaste. The 1,000 mg softgels undergo a specialized cold processing method that preserves the naturalness of garlic while reducing the odor. 100 softgels, $5.99; Walgreens.com

**Puritan’s Pride Ginger Relief Ginger Root**

According to the product label, the active constituents in ginger promote digestive health. Ginger is also good for alleviating occasional motion sickness. 100 capsules, $4.49; Puritan.com

**Nordic Naturals Omega-3**

This supplement contains purified deep sea fish oil from anchovies and sardines. 1,000 mg capsules also contain lemon flavoring to mask any fish aftertaste. $12.99; vitaminshoppe.com

**Prescript-Assist Broad Spectrum Probiotic Prebiotic Complex**

Unlike fragile probiotics that require refrigeration, Prescript-Assist is a proprietary formulation of 29 naturally resilient strains that support the body’s natural intestinal balance. It claims to be clinically proven to enhance gastrointestinal health and promote a healthy balance of good bacteria in the gut. 90 capsules, $69; Amazon.com