HEALTH BASICS

Chicken soup and sickness

Chicken soup is a warm food that can support fluids and nutrition during illness but does not treat the cause.

WHAT IT IS
A warm meal providing fluid, salt, energy, and nutrients

WHERE IT COMES UP
Colds, flu, poor appetite, stomach upset, and recovery

WHY IT MATTERS
Can support hydration and nutrition when eating feels difficult

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease, diagnosis, or cure for infection

WHO TO ASK
Primary care clinician, pharmacist, or registered dietitian

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No medical test applies

Overview

Chicken soup is a food, not a medical treatment. People often eat it during a cold, flu-like illness, stomach upset, or recovery because it is warm, soft, and usually easy to serve in a small portion.

Soup can provide fluid, salt, energy, and nutrients. Chicken may add protein, while vegetables, noodles, rice, or beans add different nutrients depending on the recipe. This can be useful when you have less appetite or do not feel like preparing a full meal.

Warm soup may also soothe a dry or irritated throat. Its warmth and aroma can briefly make congestion feel less bothersome. These effects may improve comfort, but they do not show that chicken soup is removing a virus or curing an infection.

Research specifically on chicken soup is limited. Some studies have examined laboratory effects or short-term changes in how people feel. They do not establish that chicken soup prevents illness, shortens an infection, or replaces medical care.

How it works

The broth contributes to your fluid intake. This matters when fever, sweating, vomiting, diarrhea, or reduced drinking causes you to lose more fluid than usual. However, chicken soup is not a specially formulated oral rehydration solution. Oral rehydration solutions contain measured amounts of water, salts, and sugar for replacing losses from vomiting or diarrhea.

Salt in soup helps replace some sodium, an important mineral involved in fluid balance and nerve function. Many packaged, canned, and restaurant soups contain a large amount of sodium, though. More is not always better, especially if you have been advised to limit sodium.

Chicken and other ingredients can provide energy and protein. Your body uses protein to maintain tissues and support normal immune function. Soup does not "boost" immunity in a way proven to stop a cold or flu, but eating enough can support your general nutritional needs during recovery.

Warm liquids may temporarily soothe the throat and improve the feeling of nasal airflow. In a small study, a hot drink improved several self-reported cold and flu symptoms, although it did not objectively improve all measures of nasal airflow. Comfort is still worthwhile, but it should not be confused with treating the cause.

One laboratory study found that chicken soup reduced the movement of certain immune cells called neutrophils. Neutrophils help the body respond to infection and inflammation. Because the experiment took place in laboratory equipment rather than in people, it cannot tell us whether eating soup changes the course of an illness.

Why it matters for your health

The main health value of chicken soup is practical. It can make fluids and food easier to take when your appetite is low. A bowl may be less demanding than a large, dry, or strongly flavored meal.

Soup can be part of supportive care for a mild respiratory illness. Supportive care aims to keep you comfortable and nourished while your body recovers. It does not target a specific virus or bacterium.

The ingredients matter more than the name "chicken soup." A soup containing chicken and vegetables may offer more protein and variety than clear broth alone. Cream-based soup may contain more fat. Noodles or rice add carbohydrate, which provides energy. Homemade and commercial recipes can differ greatly.

Chicken soup is also linked with family traditions and comfort. Familiar food may encourage you to eat when you otherwise would not. That emotional value is real, but it is separate from claims that soup has a unique medical effect.

It is reasonable to enjoy chicken soup during sickness if it suits your needs. It is also reasonable to choose another warm drink, broth, stew, or soft food. You do not need chicken soup to recover from a routine illness.

What can go wrong

Chicken soup itself is not an illness. Problems relate to its ingredients, preparation, temperature, or use in place of needed care.

High sodium intake may be a concern with canned, packaged, or restaurant soup. This is especially relevant if you have high blood pressure, heart failure, kidney disease, or another condition for which a clinician has recommended limiting sodium.

Food allergy or intolerance can occur because soup may contain milk, wheat, egg, soy, sesame, celery, or other ingredients. Noodles usually contain wheat and may not be suitable for someone with celiac disease unless the product is labeled gluten-free. Check the full ingredient list rather than relying on the soup's name.

Food poisoning can result when cooked soup is left at an unsafe temperature, cooled too slowly, or stored too long. Reheating does not reliably make every poorly stored food safe because some toxins can remain.

Burns can happen if soup is served too hot. This is a particular concern for children, older adults, and anyone who has reduced sensation or difficulty handling a bowl.

Choking or aspiration is possible for someone with swallowing problems. Aspiration means food or liquid enters the airway instead of the stomach. Thin broth, soft solids, and mixed textures may each present different swallowing difficulties.

Chicken soup may also give false reassurance if it replaces assessment for a more serious problem. A meal can support comfort, but it cannot rule out pneumonia, severe dehydration, an asthma flare, or another condition requiring care.

What you can do

Choose a soup that you enjoy and can tolerate. If your appetite is low, try a small amount rather than forcing a full bowl. Other drinks and foods can also contribute to hydration and nutrition.

Useful actions include:

If you have been given a sodium or fluid limit, ask your clinician or registered dietitian how soup fits into that plan. People with swallowing difficulties can ask a speech and language therapist

or swallowing specialist whether the soup's texture is suitable.

For a mild illness that is improving, no special test or routine follow-up is needed because you ate chicken soup. Focus on whether you can drink, urinate normally, eat some food, and gradually return to usual activities.

Seek prompt medical advice if you cannot keep fluids down, are passing much less urine, have persistent vomiting or diarrhea, or are becoming worse rather than better.

Call emergency services for severe trouble breathing, blue or grey lips, sudden confusion, collapse, unresponsiveness, or choking that blocks breathing. Soup should never delay emergency help.

- Check the Nutrition Facts label for sodium and serving size
- Read the ingredient list if you have allergies or celiac disease
- Add chicken, beans, vegetables, rice, or noodles if appropriate
- Keep a record of fluids if you are struggling to drink
- Refrigerate leftovers promptly and reheat them safely
- Let very hot soup cool before tasting or serving it

Common questions

Does chicken soup cure a cold or flu?

No. Colds and flu are viral infections, and chicken soup has not been shown to cure them. It may provide fluid, nutrition, warmth, and temporary symptom comfort.

Is homemade soup better than canned soup?

Not automatically. Homemade soup gives you more control over ingredients and salt. Canned soup is convenient and can still be nutritious. Compare labels because sodium and nutrient content differ between products.

Does the steam clear congestion?

Warmth and steam may briefly make your nose or throat feel more comfortable. They do not remove the infection. Avoid leaning over boiling liquid because steam and hot water can cause burns.

Is broth enough when I am vomiting or have diarrhea?

Broth provides fluid and salt, but it is not the same as an oral rehydration solution. If fluid losses are significant or you cannot keep drinks down, seek medical advice.

Can children have chicken soup?

Children who safely manage the ingredients and textures can eat it, but it should be cooled to prevent burns. Consider allergy, choking, and sodium concerns. A child who is unusually sleepy, struggling to breathe, or unable to drink needs medical assessment rather than food alone.

Is there a vegetarian equivalent?

Yes. Vegetable soup can provide similar warmth and fluid. Beans, lentils, tofu, or other suitable ingredients can add protein. The benefits come mainly from the soup's fluid, nutrients, temperature, and acceptability-not from chicken alone.

Sources

- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. Colds and Flu: What To Do . Information on supportive care and the limits of complementary approaches.
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- U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service. Leftovers and Food Safety . Advice on cooling, storing, and reheating cooked food.
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