

Common colds: Does echinacea work?



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Echinacea is a plant that is a popular treatment for the common cold. The wide variety of echinacea products available differ in strength and content, depending on which species or part of the plant they use (leaves, roots, flowers or whole plants), how the plant is processed and whether the product includes other ingredients. This means that there is no guarantee that the products that you can buy have the same effect as the few that have been tested in trials. Echinacea products are available in the form of drops, liquids, capsules and tablets.

Research on echinacea

A group of researchers from the Cochrane Collaboration – an international network of researchers – reviewed trials that tested echinacea products. They wanted to know whether echinacea can effectively prevent or treat the common cold. They were also interested in whether any of the products help more than others.

People usually recover from colds quite quickly, with or without treatment. This means that it is not easy to tell whether or not a particular treatment has worked. So the researchers only looked for so-called randomised controlled trials (RCTs). You can read about how these trials are done and why they provide the most reliable results [here](http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.61.en.html) (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.61.en.html>).

The researchers found 16 trials comparing echinacea with a dummy treatment (a placebo), two comparing it with no treatment, and one trial comparing it with a different type of herbal preparation. Most trials looked at its effectiveness in treating colds, but three looked at whether echinacea could prevent colds. Although some of the trials were of high quality, they tested a lot of different types of echinacea treatments, so it was difficult to summarise the results and get an overall picture of the effects of this plant.

Echinacea might relieve the symptoms of a cold

Some of the trials suggest that products using the flowers and leaves of one type of echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea*) might help in the early stages of colds in adults. However,

not all of the trials came to the same conclusion. Those that looked at prevention did not find that echinacea products can prevent colds. There are currently not enough trials to say for sure whether echinacea really does prevent colds, or at least relieve the symptoms.

The different echinacea products rarely had adverse effects. If any did arise, they were usually nausea or rashes. In one study, children were found to have more rashes, which may have been caused by an allergic reaction. Although allergies to echinacea are rare, some researchers believe that people who have other allergies or asthma should be aware of the allergy risk when using echinacea.

A lot of people take echinacea products for long periods of time. In Germany, the drug regulatory authorities recommend that echinacea products not be taken for longer than a certain length of time, which varies from product to product. To find out the recommended maximum time period for a particular product, read the package insert or ask your doctor or pharmacist. According to the Cochrane review, there are no trials in which people took echinacea products for longer than 12 weeks, so the long-term effects are not clear.

You can read more about the common cold in our feature (URL:

<http://www.informedhealthonline.org/common-cold.240.56.en.htm>

. Find out what you can do to protect yourself and your family from respiratory viruses in our fact sheet (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.319.en.html>)

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Glossary

Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international network of thousands of researchers and others. They work together in teams called Cochrane Review Groups to answer questions about health care by doing systematic reviews of evidence. To achieve this, the members of the Collaboration have developed systems and methods for systematically finding and analysing the results of trials of health care interventions. The goal of the Cochrane Collaboration is to help patients, health care practitioners and others make more informed decisions about health care. You can read more about the Cochrane Collaboration at their website.

allergy

An allergy is the body's overly sensitive reaction to a foreign substance. The body produces antibodies just as it would if the substance were a germ, although it is not dangerous to the body. The symptoms of the allergy partly depend on the substance causing it, the allergen. People with allergies often have symptoms like running nose, watery eyes, itching, rashes, stomach and bowel problems or asthma. Typical allergens are pollen, animal hair, proteins in certain food or house dust mite excrement.

asthma

Asthma (asthma bronchiale) is a permanent (chronic) disease with symptoms like coughing and breathlessness often occurring in acute attacks. In asthma, the airways are overly sensitive. The development of asthma is often associated with an overreaction to foreign substances or physical stimuli, frequently in connection with an allergy.

Sources

IQWiG health information is based on research in the international literature. We identify the most scientifically reliable knowledge currently available, particularly so-called “systematic reviews”. These summarise and analyse the results of scientific research on the benefits and harms of treatments and other health care interventions. This helps medical professionals and people who are affected by the medical condition to weigh up the pros and cons. You can read more about systematic reviews and why these can provide the most trustworthy evidence about the state of knowledge here (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.61.en.html>) . The authors of the major systematic reviews on which our information is based are always approached to help us ensure the medical and scientific accuracy of our products.

Linde K, Barrett B, Wölkart K, Bauer R, Melchart D. Echinacea for preventing and treating the common cold. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2008, Issue 1. [PubMed summary (URL: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16437427>)]

Huntley AL, Thompson Coon J, Ernst E. The safety of herbal medicinal products derived from Echinacea species: a systematic review. *Drug Saf* 2005; 28: 387-400.

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

Evidence basis of our health information

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at **www.informedhealthonline.org**

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