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Common colds: Should we follow the "drink more fluids" advice?



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“Drink plenty of fluids!” We have all heard this advice before when we have a cold, the flu or any other respiratory tract infection. The idea behind this is that we lose more fluids when we have a fever. There is also a belief that extra fluids can help relieve mucus buildup.

But this advice is an example of a long-held belief for which there is no scientific basis. Researchers from the Cochrane Collaboration, an international network of researchers, tried to find out if there are any trials that can answer the question of whether increasing fluid intake can really help with respiratory tract infections. They also looked for any evidence that it might do harm.

The researchers found no trials of the practice at all, and a new search in 2009 did not produce any results either. There is, then, no evidence for or against the “more fluids” advice. The researchers came to the conclusion that people with respiratory tract infections like colds can just drink what feels right for them. Warm drinks can help ease sore throats, for example. But there is no medical reason to drink more than is comfortable.

You can read more about respiratory tract infections and how to relieve the typical symptoms of a cold here (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.382.56.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.

evidence

Evidence is what we call scientific proof from well-conducted, good-quality scientific trials that have been carefully designed to answer specific questions. Depending on the types of questions, different scientific research methods (types of study) are most appropriate to find reliable answers to these questions. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), for example, are the best way to get reliable evidence on the effectiveness of medical treatments (interventions). This type of study, however, is not the best form of evidence for all possible questions, and does not provide the best answers to all kinds of questions, either. Epidemiological studies, for example, are very suitable for establishing well-founded proof for the spreading of a disease in the population.

infection

In medicine, we speak of an infection when a person has caught a germ (an infectious agent). This germ can be a bacterium, a virus, a fungus or a worm. The germ multiplies and then either spreads throughout the body or only attacks one particular organ. As long as there are no signs of a disease, this is called an asymptomatic infection. When the body shows a reaction to the germ in the form of symptoms, this is called a symptomatic infection (an infectious disease). The period between the moment the germs enter the body and the moment the first symptoms of the disease appear, is called the incubation period. It may last a few hours or days, or even many years. An infection does not necessarily have to lead to the onset of a disease.

Sources

Guppy MPB, Mickan SM, Del Mar CB. Advising patients to increase fluid intake for treating acute respiratory infections. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2005, Issue 4. [Cochrane summary (URL: <http://www.mrw.interscience.wiley.com/cochrane/clsysrev/articles/CD004419/frame.html>)]

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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