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Preventing colds: Washing your hands is more effective than taking vitamins

The days are getting shorter, temperatures are dropping, and the cold and flu season is beginning. Many people have started taking vitamin C tablets as a precautionary measure. But research has shown that vitamin supplements do not provide nearly as much protection as other measures, like frequently washing your hands - and that high doses can even be harmful. The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) has published information and a quiz on the subject of prevention, helping to separate widespread myths from facts.

Promising news is quickly assumed to be true

Many people overestimate the benefits of vitamin C and other antioxidants. For years it was believed that taking vitamin C supplements not only provided protection against colds, but also against cancer, thereby helping people to live longer. An easy-to-understand summary of the research in this area, refuting these beliefs, has now been published on IQWiG's website www.informedhealthonline.org. "Not only is there no proof that some antioxidants prolong life, but there is some evidence that certain products may even lead to earlier death", says Professor Peter Sawicki, the Institute's Director.

"Positive" news gives people hope, which can quickly spread, become deeply held beliefs. Professor Sawicki: "It can be very difficult to accept that these beliefs are myths, but they are not true if further research does not confirm them or the research points to the opposite conclusion."

Simple strategies can prevent respiratory infections

Whether it is caused by a mild cold or the flu, a runny nose and sore throat are signs of a viral infection. Many people are absolutely convinced that vitamin C provides protection against respiratory infections. Yet research has shown that vitamin C does not prevent infection, and that high doses can even be harmful.

There are many simple but effective ways to lower the risk of respiratory infections. These include frequently washing your hands with normal soap and water, and not touching your face with your hands. People who already have a respiratory infection can stop it from spreading by throwing away tissues immediately after using them and not shaking hands with other people.

In a quiz published on www.informedhealthonline.org today, you can test how much you know about preventing

illness and find out some facts which may surprise you.

The Institute's website, www.informedhealthonline.org, provides the public with easy-to-understand information about current medical developments and research on important health issues. If you would like to be kept up-to-date with the latest publications on the independent health information website, you can subscribe to the [informedhealthonline.org](http://www.informedhealthonline.org) newsletter.

More information:
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Glossary

vitamin C

Vitamin C is water-soluble. It is also called ascorbic acid. It is the vitamin that people need to have the most of every day. It occurs primarily in fresh fruit and vegetables. Vitamin C is one of the antioxidants. This means it protects cells from damage caused by particular aggressive atoms and molecules called free radicals. The food industry uses it frequently as a conservative. A major vitamin C deficiency leads to tiredness, irritability, and symptoms in bones, cartilage and teeth.

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

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

Disclaimer

This information was prepared and published by the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG). It is based on the evidence and other scientific literature available at the time of publication. The information is intended for the use of patients in Germany. It is not intended to for use to diagnose illnesses and the information is not intended to substitute for medical advice.