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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.

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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.