

A Natural Approach to Treating the Common Cold

During this time of year it is normal to see more and more cases of upper respiratory tract infections, mainly the common cold. If you're like me, many of you may have already suffered through your first bout of the season. The increased incidence of colds sends many people into their local pharmacy in search of natural alternatives for treatment and prevention. A common option is echinacea, a well known herbal product. It is estimated that echinacea represents approximately 10% of all natural supplements sold in the US. So why is there such a high demand? Echinacea has attracted interest due to its reported ability to boost the immune system. It is thought that with a heightened immune system our bodies will be better equipped to fight off infections.

In the treatment of colds and other upper respiratory tract infections, many studies in humans have found echinacea to reduce both the severity and duration of symptoms. That being said there have been other studies that have demonstrated no benefit to taking echinacea. At this time we cannot say with certainty that echinacea is effective in the treatment of these infections. What we can say however is that this herb may be a viable option in certain individuals looking for a natural product.

I often see people looking at vitamins and other natural products for the prevention of colds, as they do not want to catch an infection from a sick coworker or family member. It is important to know that echinacea has not been shown to be effective in the prevention of upper respiratory tract infections in humans. Keep in mind that one of the simplest yet most important things you can do is to properly wash your hands as often as possible. Soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer should be used to eliminate the virus and help prevent infection.

Echinacea is available in various dosage forms, including capsules, juice, tinctures, and teas. There has not been a medicinal dose established for echinacea, however a common dosing range is 500 to 1000mg capsules three times daily for 5 to 7 days. It is important to know that there are different species of echinacea available. The *Echinacea purpurea* herb is thought to be the most potent of the family for the treatment of colds.

The dosing and safety of echinacea has not been studied very well in children (under the age of 18). This herb has also been associated with an increased incidence of rash in children. For these reasons the use of echinacea in this age group is not recommended.

Very few side effects have been documented from echinacea when used at recommended doses. However, reported side effects include stomach upset, rash, drowsiness, headache, and muscle aches.

During this time of year it is normal to see more cases of the common cold. This also means that many people will be looking for natural alternatives for both treatment and prevention. It is important to know that natural does not necessarily mean safer. Just like prescription and non-prescription medications, herbal and natural health products contain chemicals that affect our bodies. They should be treated the same as any prescription or non-prescription medication. Be sure to talk to your pharmacist or physician prior to starting any natural health product. Remember, your health is our number one priority!

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