

The common cold: To supplement or not to supplement, you be the judge



It seems like the last few months I have been hit with some sort of ailment that puts me “under the weather” for at least a week. Being that I have a small child at home, I just attributed it to the fact that I am in that period of time where everyone gets whatever “bugs” are brought home from children.

My mom suggested taking Airborne when I feel something coming on. She really attested to how it seems to help her when she travels overseas. So, I thought maybe I should try it. But, does it really work?

The Wellness Letter from the School of Public Health at the University of California at Berkley provides “their take” on several supplements for the common cold. These single nutrients or herbs that are marketed with cold-fighting ability may not stand up to scientific scrutiny.

Airborne is a common supplement that at one time had to pay a \$30 million settlement to the Federal Trade Commission for making unproven claims about curing and preventing colds and flu. This supplement is packed with vitamins (A, C and E), minerals (magnesium, zinc and selenium) and Echinacea, ginger and bouquet of other herbs. So far, there have been inconsistent results with various controlled studies with some of the ingredients in Airborne.

Conclusion: Airborne is a waste of money and actually may weaken bones if the supplement is taken often over time because of the high vitamin A level.

Echinacea is an herbal remedy that claims to stimulate the immune system and have antiviral and anti-inflammatory effects. Again, studies are inconsistent in showing any real cold-fighting effects. A 2010 and 2011 study found that the Echinacea was no better than a placebo at preventing colds or reducing the symptoms.

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Conclusion: Claims about cold-fighting effects of Echinacea are unsupported by solid research.

With very little human research to back the common belief that garlic can prevent the common cold, one should think twice about trying this method. About all it is going to give you is bad breath.

Cold-fX, a patented North American extract of ginseng, that you can only get online in the U.S. may help against colds and flu when taken daily for several months. However, that is going to cost you about \$30 a month. With that, and the possibility that long term use may interact negatively with certain drugs, like the blood thinner, warfarin, and cause potential problems in those that have health conditions, like autoimmune disorders, is it really worth it?

Probiotics are supplements that provide good bacteria to the intestines that can strengthen immunity and support digestive health. Again, studies are limited, and therefore, this supplement is not recommended for cold prevention.

The big vitamin C, is a popular nutrient supplement that has numerous claims of cold-fighting ability. However, with mixed results from studies looking at the vitamin's role in reducing the severity and/or duration of cold symptoms, the verdict seems to be changing. A good point was made about vitamin C, "If there were a significant benefit, it wouldn't be so hard to prove."

There is the same consensus for vitamin D, which is thought to protect against respiratory infections because of its role in the immune system. Vitamin D has been found to be a good supplement for bone health but not in preventing or decreasing the effects of the common cold. A few studies looked at giving vitamin D for 12 weeks to see if the participant's risk of upper respiratory infections decreased. Again, the studies had disappointing results.

This could have been due to the fact that these individuals had normal levels of vitamin D; maybe it would have been different for individuals that were deficient in vitamin D.

Last, but not least, what about zinc? This is a supplement that should be used with caution. Prolonged use of high doses of zinc can interfere with the absorption of copper and then impair

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the immune system. Zinc directly applied to the nose can actually damage the sense of smell, so avoid any zinc product applied directly to the nose. In addition, zinc products can cause possible side effects, like nausea, diarrhea, cramps and bad taste in the mouth.

The research shows that zinc lozenges taken within 24 hours of cold symptoms may reduce the severity and duration of a cold by a day. No research shows that zinc products will prevent the cold, however. Consequently, with some health risks, is the minimal benefit worth it?

Basically, it probably is not going to hurt if you take a supplement as you feel a cold coming on, but not throughout a cold season as is often recommended, because there can be adverse effects. Probably the best thing you can do to prevent illness that has been supported by research is wash your hands frequently and get your immunizations, like the flu shot. Of course, talk with your doctor to see what they recommend.

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