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Nutrients for the Common Cold? Will Anything Help Relieve Symptoms?

With cold season well upon us, athletes find themselves looking for a remedy to help battle a cold so they may continue training. There are plenty of cold medications on the pharmacy shelves, but they can leave you feeling groggy. What about commonly used natural therapies, like zinc, vitamin C, or Echinacea? Do these supplements really work? Let's take an updated look at the scientific reviews and see.

Echinacea

Echinacea purpurea is one of the most popular herbal supplements in both the US and Europe. Most people take Echinacea to help recover from a cold and it seems to help. Double-blind, placebo-controlled studies involving more than 1,000 people have found that various forms of Echinacea can reduce cold symptoms and help you get over a cold faster (2, 9). On average, people taking echinacea recovered from a cold 1.4 days faster than groups taking a placebo and also reported less severe symptoms.

The type of Echinacea that works best is the above-ground portion (flowers, stems, leaves) and not the root, of the E. purpurea plant. The best time to take Echinacea is at the first sign of getting a cold and then continue taking it for 7 to 10 days. The typical dosage is powdered extract (usually in pill form) at 300mg, 3 times a day. While it may be tempting to take Echinacea all winter long to help prevent getting a cold, the results from studies attempting to discover whether the daily use can prevent colds have not been promising (5, 6). The good news is that Echinacea does appear to be safe, with no toxic side effects noted (5, 9).

Vitamin C

Many athletes are already taking vitamin C supplements for their antioxidant properties, but does it also help pre-

vent colds? It seems that taking vitamin C to prevent getting a cold is not warranted. However, it may help lessen the symptoms and severity of a cold. In reviewing studies of vitamin C and the common cold between the years of 1996 and 2004, researchers could not draw any significant conclusions that vitamin C supplements helped the normal population ward off a cold, but they did find that it could help shorten the duration and severity of a cold (1). It seems that vitamin C does play some role in respiratory defense mechanisms, so taking a supplement when you first feel a cold coming on may help.

Researchers did find that special populations that engage in severe physical exercise (military recruits, marathon runners) might benefit from regular supplementation, as several studies pointed towards a reduction of the incidence of the common cold by 45 to 91 percent (3). If you are training for an endurance event, for instance, it may be worthwhile to take a daily vitamin C supplement. The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for vitamin C is 90 mg/day for adult males and 75 mg/day for adult females day (10), but in the studies people were taking between 2 and 4 grams a day while they had a cold.

Vitamin C is safe when taken in moderate amounts, but be aware that too much vitamin C can cause diarrhea and other gastric disturbances. The Upper Tolerable Intake Level for vitamin C in adults is 2 grams/day.

Zinc

Zinc is another popular supplement that people take during a cold and it does seem to work. There are different types of zinc supplements, pills, lozenge, nasal spray, and they work differently. Chronic zinc deficiency is known to weaken the immune system, so taking an oral supplement containing 8 mg a day (the RDA) may be worthwhile if you follow a diet that does not contain much dietary zinc. Oys-

ters are an excellent source of zinc—one oyster contains 8 – 15 mg of zinc. Other types of shellfish, along with poultry and meat are high in zinc, providing 1 mg to 8 mg of zinc per serving. Whole grains, nuts and seeds also provide small amounts of zinc, but the zinc from them is not as readily absorbed by the body. So, a vegetarian may consider taking a zinc supplement, but should not exceed the upper limit of 40mg a day.

Usually zinc is used in lozenges or nasal spray during a cold to help lessen the symptoms. The idea is not to put more zinc into the body, but rather to coat the nasal passage or throat with zinc, as it is believed to directly interfere with the virus. Several studies have shown that zinc lozenges in the form of zinc acetate taken at the start of a cold were shown to reduce the duration and severity of cold symptoms (4, 7, 8). However, be careful when choosing a zinc lozenge as certain ingredients can interfere with the effectiveness of zinc. Certain flavoring agents, such as citric acid and tartaric acid, might prevent zinc from inhibiting viruses. Nasal gels containing zinc can also be found, but are generally not recommended because if the gel is inhaled too deeply severe pain may occur.

Bottom Line: There is enough evidence supporting the use of vitamin C, Echinacea, and zinc lozenges to be taken at the very first sign of a cold and throughout the entire duration of the cold to help lessen the severity of the cold. It seems that none of them can prevent you from getting a cold, but they all may play a role in reducing the duration of the cold. You choose whether you prefer to part with your cold a day or two sooner to return to training or competition. The best way to ward off colds is to take in adequate nutrients through a healthy diet, get enough sleep, and wash your hands often. ■

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