



The common cold

This greatest bugbear of an upper respiratory tract infection is usually caused by bacteria or viruses, or even occasionally, allergic reactions. The resulting inflammation causes all of those familiar symptoms of the larynx (laryngitis), throat (pharyngitis), nose (rhinitis, nasal congestion, sneezing), eyes (watering eyes), lymph nodes (swelling in the neck) and, often, the paranasal sinuses (sinusitis).

Although modern medicine has nothing at all to offer cold sufferers, alternative medicine offers an embarrassment of riches.

Acupressure

Carrying out acupressure on yourself can work. Self-performed nasal acupressure was shown to give significant relief from nasal congestion associated with the common cold, compared with no intervention, in a randomized controlled trial (*Am J Rhinol*, 1999; 13: 77-9).

Sauna

Having regular saunas (about twice a week for six months) has also resulted in a lower incidence of colds, according to research (*Ann Med*, 1990; 22: 225-7).

Exercise

Regular exercise also helps to prevent colds, and shortens the duration of those that occur. According to three randomized clinical trials, following an exercise regime results in shorter and fewer infections. Studies clearly indicate that regular moderate exercise is associated with a lower risk of catching the common cold. In contrast, those who lead a sedentary lifestyle have a moderate (as expected) risk of catching colds. Ironically, elite athletes face the greatest risk of developing colds as a result of their intense training (*Int J Sports Med*, 1997; 18: S69-77).

Folk remedies

No doubt many intuitively believe that steam inhalation helps—and now science shows that it's more than an old wife's tale. Steam inhalation of *Matricaria recutita* (German chamomile) was shown to reduce cold symptoms in a placebo-controlled trial. The more frequently the patients inhaled steam, the greater the effect on their symptoms (*Eur J Pharmacol*, 1990; 183: 728-9).

Homeopathy

Two placebo-controlled trials—one involving nearly 300 patients—showed that homeopathy can clear colds quickly (*Zeitschr Allgemeinmed*, 1997; 73: 308-14; *Br J Clin Pharmacol*, 1989; 27: 329-35). Two further trials demonstrated that homeopathic remedies produce results similar to those with aspirin in colds (*Drug Res*, 1988; 38: 578-82; *Drug Res*, 1981; 31: 732-6).

Homeopathy has also proved effective for allergy-induced cold-like symptoms. A meta-analysis of seven placebo-controlled, randomized trials of the homeopathic remedy *Galphimia glauca* demonstrated that, at a low potency, the

remedy is effective for both ocular and nasal symptoms. Although its 79 per cent rate is comparable to those reported for orthodox treatments, unlike them, homeopathy comes with minimal side-effects (*Forsch Komplementarmed*, 1996; 3: 230-4).

Nutritional supplementation

Perhaps the most studied alternative cold remedy is vitamin C. A review of 30 controlled trials—involving more than 8000 patients—of high-dose (more than 1 g/day) vitamin C found that there was no consistent evidence that vitamin C can prevent colds. However, as a treatment, vitamin C shortened the duration of colds by an average of a half-day (*Systematic review: Vitamin C for respiratory tract infection*. Cochrane Library, 1997).

Zinc and other trace minerals have been proven effective as a cold preventative. According to a placebo-controlled, randomized trial of 725 patients, elderly institutionalized patients taking zinc and selenium in combination experienced fewer colds (*Arch Intern Med*, 1999; 159: 748-54).

Often overlooked as a colds fighter, vitamin A is a potent virus-killer¹ (*Antimicrob Agents Chemother*, 1980; 17: 1034-7). Nevertheless, because of its potential toxicity at very high doses, only take vitamin A under professional guidance.

Phytotherapy

A number of herbs have a solid evidence of success against colds. *Andrographis paniculata* (green chiretta) taken during the first stages of a cold can reduce the severity and duration of symptoms (*Phytother Res*, 1995; 9: 559-62; *Phytomedicine*, 1997; 3: 315-8; *Phytomedicine*, 1999; 6: 217-33). In all three studies, the herb was also well tolerated.

Although *Echinacea* (cone flower) is the most well-known herbal treatment for colds, the scientific data are confusing. One review of randomized clinical trials using three kinds of *Echinacea* (*E. angustifolia*, *E. pallida* and *E. purpurea*) extract found positive results for both the prevention and treatment of colds, but there were minor inconsistencies in the presented evidence, possibly because of publication bias (*Systematic review: Echinacea for upper respiratory tract infection*. Cochrane Library, 1998).

A subsequent randomized, controlled trial of 95 people drinking *Echinacea* tea showed that those taking the tea had a shorter duration of symptoms than those drinking a placebo (*J Altern Complement Med*, 2000; 6: 327-34).

What to do about flu despite the vaccine

One of the embarrassing side-effects of flu vaccines is a tendency to suffer from flu or flu-like symptoms. But one trial discovered that taking ginseng could stave off colds and flu in those who had had the jab. In a randomized, controlled trial of 227 patients given the flu vaccine, those who took 100 mg/day of ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) for 12 weeks reduced their frequency of colds and flu while increasing their immunity (*Drugs Exper Clin Res*, 1996; 22: 65-72).

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