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Best & Worst Natural Cold & Flu Remedies



Supplements to survive sneeze season

Flu shots, hand washing, healthy eating, and regular exercise are the best ways to avoid cold and flu. But sometimes even the most scrupulous germphobes and healthy people get sick anyway. While certain natural remedies can help shorten symptoms—or prevent infection entirely—many people waste money on measures that are all hype. Here's how to know the difference so you can get well faster—without wasting a penny.

Omega 3s

The Verdict: Help

Take it: All season long

If you don't like or eat a lot of fish, pop an omega-3 supplement daily to reap the fatty acid's impressive immune-

fortifying properties. Omega 3s increase the activity of phagocytes—cells that fight flu by eating up bacteria—according to a study by Britain's Institute of Human Nutrition and School of Medicine. Other research shows that omega-3s increase airflow and protect lungs from colds and respiratory infections.

Look for purified fish oil capsules that contain at least 1 g combined of EPA and DHA.

Astragalus

The Verdict: Help

Take it: All season long

This Chinese root is shown to stimulate the white blood cells that fight infection, says Prevention advisor Andrew Weil, MD. A study published in 2007 found that astragalus appears to boost immunity in mice. And a pilot study suggests that the herb may have similar effects in people. However, keep in mind that astragalus may take 6 to 8 weeks to reach its full effect.

Echinacea

The Verdict: Hype

If taken at the start of a cold, this herb might shorten duration and severity of symptoms. But some brands don't contain the amount of echinacea listed on the label—and some contain none at all. Possible side effects include wheezing, rash, and diarrhea.

Vitamin D

The Verdict: Help

Take it: All season long

This power nutrient may alter the immune system's response to viruses, says Prevention advisor Andrew Weil, MD. A study published in 2007 found that vitamin D appears to boost immunity in mice. And a pilot study suggests that the herb may have similar effects in people. However, keep in mind that astragalus may take 6 to 8 weeks to reach its full effect.

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[NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with Simple Again's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you.]

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This power nutrient may effectively boost immunity and help prevent colds, a Harvard study shows. People with the lowest vitamin D levels were 36% more likely to have upper respiratory infections, compared with those with the most D. (Asthma patients with low levels of D were nearly 6 times as likely to get sick as those with the greatest amounts.) Adequate amounts of D help produce cathelicidin, a protein with virus-killing qualities.

Since it's tough to get enough from sunlight or diet (fish and fortified dairy are the best sources), you'll need a supplement to attain optimal levels, says study author Carlos A. Camargo Jr., MD. Aim for at least 1,000 IU daily.

Ginseng-powered supplements

The Verdict: Help

Take it: When you feel sick

Consider taking this supplement, which contains North American ginseng extract, when you feel a cold coming on. Subjects who took two daily capsules of Cold-fX caught half as many colds as a group taking a placebo, according to a study by the Center for Immunotherapy of Cancer and Infectious Diseases at the University of Connecticut. When they did get sick, their symptoms lasted less than half as long. This particular ginseng variety contains compounds that increase white blood cells and interleukins, proteins the immune system relies on.

Zinc

The Verdict: Help

Take it: When you feel sick

The research on this mineral is conflicting. Still, "30 mg taken at the very start of a cold will shorten it by about half a day," says David L. Katz, MD, MPH, director of the Yale University Prevention Research Center. Look for Zicam or Cold-Eeze. By slowing the multiplication of the virus in the nose and throat, these products appear to shorten colds. But don't overdo it. While even a slight deficiency in zinc, which is needed to produce white blood cells, can increase your risk of infection, more than 50 mg daily can suppress your immune system and block absorption of other essential minerals.

Vitamin C

The Verdict: Hype

There's certainly no downside to eating a lot of C-rich foods, such as red peppers and citrus fruits. But taking a vitamin for extra protection won't help. A 2007 review of 30 studies found no evidence that vitamin C supplementation prevents colds in the normal population. Plus, megadoses can cause kidney stones, upset stomach, and even internal bleeding in children.

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