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EXTRA

The independent newsletter that reports vitamin, mineral, and food therapies

Which Supplements Should You Take to Protect Yourself Against Colds and Flus?

By Jack Challem

It has been years since I've had a flu shot – they used to leave me feeling lethargic – and it has been years since I caught the flu. With the extreme shortage of flu vaccines this year, I've decided to share my personal supplement regimen for both preventing and fighting cold and flu symptoms.

My suggestions fall into two areas, covering general prevention and the aggressive suppression and reversal of symptoms. The research suggests that these supplements work best preventively and on the first day of an apparent cold or flu infection. If you wait until the second or third day, the supplements will be of less, and possibly no, benefit. The reason is that viral concentrations increase sharply after the first day, and they become more difficult for the body to control. By using NAC and at least some of the other supplements described here, I have been able to consistently reduce a standard seven-day cold to a mild two-to-three-day cold.

N-acetylcysteine: In one of the most dramatic clinical studies I've ever read, NAC supplements significantly reduced flu symptoms in a group of elderly subjects. Silvio De Flora, MD, of the University of Genoa, Italy, asked 262 subjects to take 600 mg of NAC twice daily or placebos for six months overlapping the cold and flu season.

First, De Flora studied general flu-like symptoms among his subjects. These symptoms included fever, headache, achiness, nasal discharge, cough, and sore throat. Each month, subjects taking NAC had one-third to one-half fewer flu-like symptoms, compared with people taking placebos.

De Flora then looked at a subgroup with laboratory-confirmed flu. Only 25 percent of them developed symptoms, compared with 79 percent of those taking placebos. In other words, NAC supplements reduced the likelihood of having flu symptoms by about two-thirds.

He also found that people taking NAC spent

less time in bed recovering from the flu. Of 10 people who had flu-like symptoms and were not bedridden, nine were taking NAC.

What to take: I take 500 mg of NAC daily throughout the year, doubling it during the cold and flu season. When I sense initial cold or flu symptoms, I immediately increase the dosage to 2,000 to 3,000 mg daily. If I end up developing a cold, I may take up to 4,000 to 6,000 mg daily. NAC's only drawback is that the capsules have a strong rotten egg smell.

Vitamin C. More than two dozen clinical studies have found that vitamin C can reduce the symptoms and severity of the common cold (and presumably the flu). The most effective dosages range from 2,000 to 6,000 mg daily.

What to take: In general, your body's optimal level of vitamin C is based on bowel tolerance—that is, the amount (divided up two or three times a day) just below what causes loose stools. When you're fighting a cold or flu, your vitamin C requirements increase sharply. If you follow the bowel-tolerance concept, you may find yourself temporarily taking 10 or 20 grams of vitamin C daily. As you recover, your vitamin C requirements will decrease.

Vitamin E. A recent study found that seniors who took vitamin E supplements were less likely to suffer colds and other upper respiratory infections.

What to take: 200 IU to 400 IU of natural source vitamin E daily.

Selenium: This mineral is a component of the body's four glutathione peroxide compounds, potent antioxidants and immune stimulants. Clinical and animal studies by Melinda A. Beck, Ph.D., of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, along with Chinese researchers, have found that selenium deficiencies increase the likelihood of mutations in flu and coxsackie viruses, leading to more severe infections.

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What to take: 200 mcg daily, 400 mcg if you are actually fighting cold or flu.

Lysine: This amino acid inhibits the growth of many viruses, including those that cause herpes infections.

What to take: To fight a cold or flu, take 500 to 1,000 mcg daily with the other supplements recommended here.

Zinc: This mineral inhibits the replication of the virus that causes colds. Although some studies have yielded conflicting results, zinc lozenges can often reduce the severity and length of cold and flu symptoms. The most tested brand (Cold-Eeze) provides about 13 mg of zinc per lozenge.

What to take: Follow label directions, taking one zinc lozenge every couple of hours, starting at the first sign of symptoms.

Vitamin A: Several studies have found that large amounts of vitamin A can reduce the severity and risk of death in vitamin-deficient children with measles, chicken pox, and respiratory viral infections. In addition, very, very high dosages of pure vitamin A (not beta-carotene) have been used in developing nations to reduce the risk of death from pneumonia in children. These dosages are 100,000 IU daily, but for only two days over a month.

What to take: Lower regular dosages should be helpful, such as 10,000 IU daily. When fighting a cold or flu, consider taking 25,000 to 50,000 IU daily—but not for more than three days. If you are pregnant, do not take more than 5,000 IU of pure vitamin A daily.

Echinacea: While some of the research is conflicting, there's sufficient evidence to take echinacea to help prevent colds and flus. The herb boosts activity of various immune cells, in a sense putting the body on a "yellow alert," ready to quickly fight an infection.

What to take: Because of the many different forms (capsules, tablets, tinctures, liquids), follow label directions.

Oscillocochinum: This is a homeopathic remedy, and the theory is that smaller dosages are more potent than larger ones, an idea that's in direct opposition to medical pharmacology. Whatever the rationale, it does seem to work (at least in this instance). A prestigious Cochrane database review cautiously acknowledged that oscillocochinum (pronounced os-sill-uh-cos-sih-num) "probably reduces the duration of illness in patients presenting with influenza symptoms." A separate review found that oscillocochinum for influenza-like illnesses was "promising."

What to take: One dose at the onset of symptoms, with additional doses six and 12 hours later.

Washing hands: The most important steps you

can take to prevent a cold or flu are to avoid contact with an infected person and to avoid touching objects the infected person has used. Because it is not always possible to follow these two steps, it is essential that you regularly wash your hands in hot soapy water, especially after being in contact with an infected person and before you touch your mouth or nose.

A reminder... Again, it is important to ramp up the dosages of the recommended supplements at the first sign of cold or flu symptoms. That ticklish nose or cough may not be from an infection, but given the potential consequences of a serious infection, it is better to err on the side of caution. If the symptoms completely disappear by the second day, you can resume your preventive dosages. If you still have any symptoms at all, continue taking the supplements for three to seven days.

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