

ECHINACEA FOR COLDS - PANACEA OR TERRIFIC PLACEBO? *by Ann Gerhardt, MD*
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Bottom Line at the Top: Echinacea, used to treat colds, has not out-performed placebo in 3 well designed studies. "Echinacea" is a group of plants, each of which contains a complex set of bio-active substances. A study only looks at the effect of one extract of one plant part of one species. Perhaps the active agent has not been studied. Echinacea seems to work in people who believe it will. It should not be taken for a long period of time or by pregnant women.

People have used Echinacea for thousands of years to treat colds and other infections. A recent, well-designed study published in the New England Journal of Medicine "proved" that an extract of Echinacea angustifolia root "doesn't work". The accompanying editorial said so and asserted that medicine should stop wasting time doing more Echinacea studies.

As I have written before, medicine and editorialists should stop being so sure of themselves. A good study compares one pure substance to another, usually a placebo (an inactive agent). The conclusions of any given study apply **only** to the specific extract (chemical preparation) of the specific herb that was studied. Science may not have studied the correct extract and herb and route of administration yet.

Two other good research studies, in which the subjects *did not know* which substance they were taking, did not show any benefit of Echinacea over placebo. In six out of seven studies in which the *subjects knew* whether they took Echinacea or placebo, Echinacea lessened symptoms and shortened the cold's duration. At the very least, Echinacea has a strong, beneficial placebo effect.

Many Echinacea varieties and preparations exist. At least three Echinacea species, *E. purpurea*, *E. angustifolia*, and *E. pallidas* exert effects on immunity in test tubes and mice. Various, but not all, extracts of the roots, seeds, flowers or leaves of the 3 different species exert effects. The active components of Echinacea might be the alkaloids, caffeic acid, other polyphenols or some unidentified compound. Each

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extract may be standardized to one or the other of these components: The researchers presume that they study the active one. This may or may not be a correct assumption.

Whether active agent or effective placebo, Echinacea is relatively safe, with a few caveats. Echinacea during pregnancy has caused fetal death. Prolonged use of Echinacea may lead to autoimmune diseases.

I strongly recommend the placebo effect for colds.

If you believe in whatever you take for a cold, it can work very well, regardless of inherent effectiveness. A burgeoning field medicine links our psyche with immune function. If you are positive and happy, the immune system *usually* works better.

As a **personal anecdote**, I can tell you that Echinacea tea (not pill) works for me. At the start of a few sniffles and throat scratches, I drink a cup or two per day. After about two days the symptoms disappear. I don't know whether it truly kills the cold or its disgusting taste makes me and my immune system ramp up so I can stop drinking it. Reducing stress and getting more sleep probably help, too.

Other tools to **prevent colds**: Wash your hands frequently. Avoid sick people and close conversations. Sleep 8 hours a day. Keep your hands away from your face until you can wash them after being in a public place or with sick people. Control allergies to avoid fluid accumulation that can become infected. Get regular, mild-moderate exercise. Stay happy and excited to live the next day. **Treatment:** Antibiotics don't work – new anti-virals aren't here yet. Over-the-counter remedies reduce symptoms. Sleep. Decide to get better.