



THE
**PEOPLE'S
PHARMACY**

Visit our Web site:
www.peoplespharmacy.com

Graedon's Guide to

Cold Remedies

OTC Cold Remedies

Be wary of multi-ingredient remedies that promise relief from a range of cold or flu symptoms. "Consumers Union's Medical Consultants believe that antihistamines have no place in cold remedies."

Common Antihistamines:

Brompheniramine
Chlorpheniramine
Clemastine
Diphenhydramine

Decongestants:

Pseudoephedrine
Phenylephrine

Oral decongestants work by constricting blood vessels in the nose.

Possible side effects:

- Heart palpitations
- Blood pressure increase
- Anxiety or nervousness
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Insomnia
- Nausea
- Urinary difficulties

Doctors used to say, if you take an over-the-counter cold remedy you'll get over your cold in a week. Or, you can take nothing at all and recover in seven days. Their point was that cold remedies might relieve some symptoms but wouldn't have any effect on the underlying viral infection.

There is now evidence that some of these remedies may actually be bad for people with colds. Products containing the decongestant phenylpropanolamine (PPA) have had to be reformulated or face removal. The danger is that this common ingredient might increase the risk of a stroke.

Although side effects such as nervousness, insomnia, headache, nausea, high blood pressure and heart palpitations had been well documented for decades, the FDA allowed PPA to stay on the market until a study funded by drug companies established the connection with stroke. Officials at the FDA admitted that as many as 200 to 500 strokes a year might be attributable to PPA. Over the last 20 years that represents somewhere between 4,000 and 10,000 preventable strokes.

PPA is not the only problem. Popular pain relievers such as aspirin, acetaminophen and ibuprofen are found in many cold and cough remedies. But we have known for decades that there could be a downside to giving these pain relievers to someone with a cold. In 1975 researchers at the University of Illinois College of Medicine wrote about their experience with aspirin in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Not only did aspirin provide little symptom relief, it increased "virus shedding" by 38 percent. This means that aspirin might make matters worse by turning you into a walking, virus-shedding "factory" more likely to spread cold viruses to folks in your vicinity—the viral equivalent of "Typhoid

Mary." These investigators concluded that "Aspirin treatment, which permits the person to stay on the job with more infectious secretions, should make him a greater epidemiologic hazard." (*JAMA* 1975; 231:1248-1251.)

Australian researchers discovered that acetaminophen and ibuprofen were almost as bad as aspirin in this regard. A double-blind, placebo-controlled trial revealed that such pain relievers dampened the body's natural immune response and actually "increased nasal symptoms." (*Journal of Infectious Diseases* 1990; 162:1277-1282.)

In December 2000, pharmacists at the University of Maryland reported that aspirin and acetaminophen actually prolonged flu symptoms by more than three days compared to people who didn't take such medications.

Finally, there are the antihistamines. These are ubiquitous in cold and cough remedies. Although such ingredients are quite helpful in relieving allergy symptoms, there has been a bit of controversy about their benefit against colds or flu. Although they may relieve symptoms a little by making your nose less drippy, there is a downside. They can make you feel so drowsy and doozy that it will be hard to do anything requiring coordination or mental ability.

Now, one might argue that if you have a bad cold you shouldn't be doing anything important anyway. We agree, but the manufacturers of such products frequently advertise them as allowing you to get back to work. Driving or operating machinery or even trying to make decisions while under the influence of antihistamine strikes us as a very bad idea, about comparable to driving under the influence of alcohol.

Think Zinc

Using Zinc Lozenges

Act fast: begin therapy within 24 hours of first symptoms.

Be persistent: suck on a lozenge every two to four hours during the day.

Zicam Nasal Gel

Many people find oral zinc lozenges hard to tolerate because of the taste. A new product, zinc nasal gel, has been shown to shorten the duration of cold symptoms significantly. If started within a day of coming down with an infection, Zicam was able to shorten the course of the cold by roughly 75%. This double-blind, placebo-controlled trial was published in the *ENT Journal* (October 2000).

Zinc is now a well-recognized treatment for the common cold. The story of how it was initially discovered as a cold remedy is fascinating. If not for a stubborn little girl we might not have learned about this approach. In the early 1980s a child with leukemia refused to swallow a 50 mg zinc gluconate tablet. Instead, she kept the tablet in her mouth and let it dissolve slowly. To her physicians' amazement, the cold she had been suffering from disappeared within several hours. This prompted them to investigate the ability of zinc to stop cold viruses from multiplying and to affect the course of the common cold.

Since that time, ten controlled trials have been conducted on zinc lozenges. Not all of the research concluded that zinc is helpful, but zinc was more effective than placebo in at least half of the studies conducted to date. Some scientists have speculated that the formulation makes a difference. Not only are some lozenges composed of zinc gluconate and others of zinc acetate, but some include flavoring agents to mask the horrible taste of zinc.

The most recent study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (Aug. 2000, pgs. 245-252) showed that if zinc acetate lozenges were given within 24 hours of the first cold symptom, patients recovered almost twice as quickly and had less severe symptoms than those on placebo. Side effects included dry mouth, constipation and bad taste.

Terrible taste is frequently a drawback of zinc lozenges. Another is nausea, which occurs in up to 20 percent of patients taking zinc lozenges. The frequent schedule, which requires sucking on a low-dose lozenge every two to four hours, is also inconvenient. Researchers in the Detroit study tried to compensate for the yucky taste by asking volunteers to guess whether a lozenge contained zinc or not. Healthy volunteers couldn't tell, but almost half of those taking zinc in the study correctly guessed that they were using zinc lozenges. As a result, Dr. Norman Desbiens questioned in an editorial whether subjects in this and other "double-blind" trials were truly unaware of which treatment they were using.

Vitamin C

Even after decades of study, vitamin C remains controversial as a way of fighting the common cold. Data have never confirmed that this vitamin can prevent upper respiratory tract infections like colds or flu, yet there is evidence that vitamin C improves immune function. Studies suggest that it is effective for relieving symptoms and shortening the duration of a cold.

There isn't any consensus about the appropriate dose of vitamin C. A leading scientist, Dr. Elliot Dick, has conducted a number of studies using 500 mg of ascorbic acid (vitamin C) four times a day. At this dose, vitamin C can ease a cold sufferer's misery with little risk of side effects. Some people are susceptible to diarrhea at high doses of vitamin C.

One of our favorite products comes from Blackmores, a very reputable herb company in Australia. Their cold remedy, Echinacea ACE + Zinc, combines vitamins A, C and E with zinc and a standardized extract of Echinacea, a North American herb. You may be able to find it on the World Wide Web:

www.blackmores.com.au

Ginger Tea

Ginger tea is popular around the world for colds. One recipe we use often came to us from India, via West Virginia. There aren't double-blind placebo-controlled studies on ginger, but there is research to indicate some constituents of ginger can attack cold viruses. Animal research also shows a ginger ingredient is as effective for coughs as the OTC cough suppressant dextromethorphan.

The recipe: Take a piece of fresh ginger root about as big as your thumb. Grate it into a mug and cover it with boiling water. Allow the mixture to steep about 5 minutes, strain and sweeten to taste. It really helps ease coughs and congestions for a while. The cough-relieving compounds (gingerols) can also reduce pain and fever, so it is no wonder it helps cold symptoms. One warning: ginger keeps blood platelets from sticking together and doesn't mix with **Coumadin**, **Plavix**, **Ticlid** or other anticoagulants.

Ten years ago, hardly anyone had even heard about Echinacea. Then word got out that this native North American herb might help fight colds and other infections by boosting the immune system, and people stocked up on it. Echinacea remains one of the most popular herbs on the market.

Most of the research has been done in Germany with formulations (such as cold-pressed juice) not available in this country. In fact, there is no standard to determine which species of echinacea is the most effective against the common cold or even what part of the plant—root, leaf, stem or flower—should be used. Perhaps as a result, research done in the U.S. does not show a consensus that echinacea has much, if any, effect on symptoms of the

common cold. The extraordinary variability of ingredients from product to product makes it very difficult to assess the benefits of this herb. Brands used in Germany such as EchinaGuard or in Switzerland like Echinaforce may provide the kind of quality control and clinical research that is not guaranteed from U.S. manufactured products.

Fortunately, the risks appear quite low. About the only toxicity appears to be associated with occasional allergy. Rare reports of rash, itching, shortness of breath or anaphylactic shock have appeared in the literature. If you wish to maximize effectiveness of echinacea you may want to look for a cold-pressed juice product made from *Echinacea purpurea*.

Most Americans have not yet heard about *Andrographis paniculata*. This Chinese herbal medicine has been used for centuries to relieve symptoms associated with colds or flu. It appears to increase the body's ability to fight off a variety of infections and lower a fever without the side effects associated with aspirin, ibuprofen or other anti-inflammatory drugs.

Double-blind, placebo-controlled trials published in the last few years by investigators from Sweden, Germany and Chile have demonstrated impressive re-

sults. Symptoms such as sore throat, cough, headache, runny nose, fever and fatigue were relieved significantly better by the *Andrographis* extract than by placebo. Side effects were rare, but in China doctors are alert for dizziness, hives and heart palpitations. Pregnant women should avoid Kan Jang. Because it can affect blood platelets, somewhat as aspirin does, we would encourage anyone taking anticoagulants such as **Coumadin** (warfarin), **Ticlid** (ticlopidine) or **Plavix** (clopidogrel) to avoid this herbal remedy.

Chinese grandmothers often put a little astragalus root into their chicken soup to speed recovery from colds and flu. Traditional healers in China believe that this herb strengthens "qi" (chi or life force). Pharmacologists have noticed that components of *Astragalus membranaceus* root fight rhinoviruses (viruses responsible for many colds), induce interferon (a natural virus-fighting compound made in the body) and activate white blood cells that fight infection.

Researchers have been looking into the potential benefits of astragalus in treating cancer, autoimmune diseases, and congestive heart failure. Unconfirmed Chinese studies suggest that astragalus compounds may also protect the

kidneys.

The usual dose of astragalus root used for treating colds is 10 g made into tea. Or you could follow the example of the Chinese grandmothers and add it to your medicinal chicken soup.

Astragalus may be incompatible with certain other medications. Because it may affect anesthesia, we do not recommend it for people facing surgery. It might also interact with **Coumadin** and other anticoagulants (such as **Ticlid** or **Plavix**) to increase the risk of bleeding. We suggest that anyone taking astragalus for a cold should avoid decongestants, as there is a possibility of interaction. Diabetes drugs and beta blockers may also interact badly.

Echinacea

German clinicians recommend that echinacea not be taken for more than eight weeks at a time. In one study, the benefits to the immune system lasted only about a week and then started to decline. People with TB, multiple sclerosis, other autoimmune diseases, HIV or AIDS should probably avoid echinacea unless told otherwise by a physician.

Kan Jang

*Kan Jang is a brand of *Andrographis paniculata* available from the Swedish Herbal Institute. (800) 774-9444 or on the Web (www.adaptogen.com)*

Astragalus

Astragalus membranaceus root can be found in many health food stores in capsules, tea bags or in tinctures. It is also included in some formulas with ginseng or other herbs. Side effects appear uncommon, but some people may experience digestive tract upset including gas or diarrhea.

Chicken Soup

GRANDMA GRAEDON'S CHICKEN SOUP RECIPE
Take one large stewing hen and throw in extra backs and wings. Cover with water and top with 2 inches more. Add: onions, celery, carrots, parsnips, parsley, bay leaf, peppercorns and salt. For extra cold-fighting power, add several cloves of garlic, up to a head. Simmer for about two hours, then strain out the chicken, vegetables and spices. The meat of the chicken is removed from the bones and added back to the soup with noodles, peas, rice or other embellishments. Refrigerating the broth overnight makes fat removal easy.

Garlic

One reader offers the following: At the first sign of a cold, mash a raw clove of garlic and spread it on a piece of toast or English muffin. Eat one of these two or three times a day to reduce symptoms.

Hot Toddies

If you like such home remedies, you will love our new book:

The People's Pharmacy Guide to Home and Herbal Remedies
\$17.95 + \$3 handling
(800) 732-2334

Medicinal use of chicken soup is documented to Roman times. Even back then, boiled chicken was considered helpful for treating respiratory problems.

Moses Maimonides back in the late 1100s may be the most famous physician ever to prescribe chicken soup. His advice seemed old-fashioned, by the late 20th century. The popularity of chicken soup persisted with mothers and grandmothers, however, and in the 1990s scientists started to look carefully at this ubiquitous cold remedy. Dr. Irwin Ziment hypothesized that the amino acid cysteine found in chicken soup might act somewhat like acetylcysteine, a drug prescribed to thin mucus in the lungs. Dr. Ziment advocates chicken soup with garlic and spices.

Doctors at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in Miami tested chicken soup against hot

Doctors around the world have been prescribing garlic for colds and coughs for a long time. Scientific studies have established that ingredients in garlic can fight fungus and bacteria. How or even whether it wards off viruses isn't well known. Nevertheless, many readers of *The People's Pharmacy* swear by the healing properties of garlic. One person was coming down with a nasty cold. He put 20 cloves of garlic in a pot of chicken soup he consumed, and the next day his symptoms were gone. Also, he didn't spread any remaining viruses: nobody at work would get close to him!

We have no idea why hot toddies of one sort or another are popular cold remedies in so many cultures. We also don't know if the alcohol is an important part of the recipe. There are plenty of people who insist that if they come down with a cold they have a hot toddy, go to bed and wake up feeling much better. Even if there is no scientific basis, it makes people feel better. Here are a few recipes:

1/4 cup bourbon
1/4 cup honey
1/4 cup lemon juice

Heat in the microwave. Don't burn your tongue! Stay put and relax.

water and cold water, and concluded that chicken soup was best in improving mucus flow in the nose. More recently, the journal *Chest* (2000; 118: 1150-1157) published research on chicken soup showing that it slows down the white blood cells that trigger inflammation in the lungs and airways. Much of the misery of a cold results from inflammatory proteins reacting to the virus. This University of Nebraska research demonstrated that there are physiological reasons behind the power of chicken soup. They used a recipe from the chief investigator's wife's grandmother, Mrs. Fleischer. Her recipe resembles that of Helen Graedon (see margin), but includes turnips and a sweet potato and does not contain garlic. She strains the soup after cooking, purees the vegetables in a food processor and adds them back to the broth with matzoh balls.

Ginger and Garlic Remedy

1/2 cup water
1/2 teaspoon powdered ginger
pinch cayenne pepper
garlic, one clove minced
1 Tablespoon honey
juice of 1/2 lemon

Boil water, ginger, pepper and garlic in a saucepan for one minute. Remove from heat and add honey and lemon juice. Let mixture cool, and hold your nose to drink it. This potion can relieve cold symptoms for about three hours.

A more classic recipe calls for a spoonful of sugar in the bottom of a mug or sturdy glass. Add hot water (as if for tea), lemon juice and a shot of rum.

For those who prefer non-alcoholic beverages, here's an alternative:

- 5 slices fresh lemon
- 5 slices fresh ginger root
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 10 whole cloves
- 1 quart water

Simmer ingredients for 15 minutes. Strain and sip one cup of liquid every 3 to 4 hours.

Tea made with a teaspoon of sage or thyme leaves per cup of hot water may help soothe coughs. Sweeten to taste.