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## ECHINACEA: AN HERBAL COLD REMEDY

### Ask Your Pharmacist

Echinacea, the most widely used herb in the United States, cuts the chances of catching the common cold by 58 percent and reduces the duration of the common cold by 1.4 days, according to a new University of Connecticut study to be published in the prominent British medical journal, *The Lancet - Infectious Diseases*.

This latest study by researchers at the University of Connecticut School of Pharmacy combined the results of 14 previous clinical trials. These trials followed 1,300 patients in order to determine Echinacea's effect on preventing the common cold. More than 1,600 patients were followed to determine Echinacea's effect on limiting the duration of the common cold.

According to Dr. Craig Coleman, who led the research, the study found that Echinacea reduced the incidence of contracting the common cold whether it was taken alone or in combination with other herbal supplements. Additionally, Echinacea was also found to reduce the chance of catching the common cold when study subjects were exposed to viruses naturally, or inoculated with a particular virus as part of the study.

The results are quite significant when one considers Americans spend about \$1.5 billion annually for doctor visits, and another \$2 billion annually on non-prescription cough and cold treatments.

Also known as Purple Coneflower, Kansas Snakeroot, or Black Sampson, Echinacea has had a long history of being utilized as a healing herb by the Native Americans. In the 1800's it became popular with the medical community in the United States and was a widely prescribed natural remedy for infections and inflammation. Its usage was recommended and studied during this time by the renowned Dr. Uri Lloyd, Dr.

John King, and Dr. H.C.L. Meyer. However, with the advent of antibiotics its popularity in America waned but its usage continued elsewhere.

Echinacea is used to stimulate the body's immune system into fighting viral and bacterial infections. It inhibits the enzyme hyaluronidase, which when activated destroys the cementing substances between cells and allows pathogens to infiltrate the body. The herb stimulates T-cells and activates macrophages that destroy foreign intracellular invaders. Echinacea increases levels of properdin, a naturally-occurring chemical thought to increase cellular resistance to infection. It also displays anti-tumor and direct antibiotic actions.

However, patients with autoimmune diseases such as lupus and multiple sclerosis need be particularly careful. Echinacea affects a liver enzyme that breaks down some drugs, so using it with prescription medications could cause unwanted drug interactions.

Nearly 38 million American adults currently use plant-based supplements in addition to their daily dose of prescribed medications. Herbs could also be described as drugs based on the actions they create inside the body and interestingly, 25% of all current drugs have been developed by isolating an active ingredient from an herb or plant. Thus many herbs are as potent as their drug counterparts. But don't buy into the misconceptions that claim herbs are natural, so they must be safe for use - it simply is not true! This means that the potential for interaction in those individuals who take drugs as well as herbs can be very significant, perhaps even fatal.

Herbs have long been considered the medicine of the planet. In many cultures, herbs remain the primary source of medicine. What worries many of our healthcare professionals is the use of herbs without the proper understanding of their potential dangers and benefits. Because many individuals who use herbal supplements do not tell their physician, they are not alerted to

**Visit our pharmacy or website to learn more about Echinacea as a cold remedy.**

# ECHINACEA (continued)

possible interactions with drugs.

Doctors and pharmacists are doing their best to understand the implications of using both forms of therapy. However, when a prescription is filled, the information about an herb is usually not known or addressed. With current sales of herbs in the tens of billions, it has become all the more necessary that we understand these interactions.

It is known that some herbs will lessen or negate the effects of a medication. The same holds true for medicines that will affect herb use. For instance, an aspirin will negate the effect of Feverfew, an herbal approach to headaches.

## **Box: ECHINACEA CAUTIONS**

*Do not use in cases of HIV.*

*Echinacea should not be taken over a long period of time. Two to three weeks usage is considered an advisable time frame for usage.*

*If used beyond 8 weeks, Echinacea could cause hepatotoxicity and therefore should not be used with other known hepatotoxic drugs, such as anabolic steroids, amiodarone, methotrexate, and ketoconazole.*

*Do not use if pregnant - Safety for use in pregnancy has not been established. Some contraindications are thought to exist.*

Some prescription medications can interact with natural products and result in undesirable effects. It is also possible for some prescription medications to cause the body to displace important nutrients and specific supplements may be recommended. Clinical research has revealed that many drugs contribute to the depletion of vitamins, minerals, enzymes, and gastrointestinal flora. These nutritional deficiencies may in turn interfere with all metabolic activity including immune function, digestion, DNA replication, glucose metabolism, cardiac function, neurological function, tissue repair, and wound healing.

As you may know, there is more and more information becoming available regarding these products and their appropriate uses. Our research indicates that some supplements and herbs can be VERY useful and may produce a significant improvement in overall health. However, it should not be assumed that it is safe or appropriate to use these products casually.

As your pharmacists, we are in the best position to discuss these important issues with you and we take our responsibility to do so very seriously. We would welcome the opportunity to review your total health care needs including nutritional supplements and herbs to determine what is truly right for you. Please come by or call for an appointment so that we may discuss these health care issues.

In the pharmacy industry, there are new information services that are helping to educate us about potential problems. Our

pharmacist have studied the current knowledge on this subject and can help you make sound choices for your healthcare, as well as inform your physician about herbs that may potentially cause problems.

Be honest with your doctor about what supplements or herbs you are taking and get to know your pharmacist. It is always a good idea to fill all your prescriptions at a single pharmacy. If it is the same pharmacist behind the counter every time, she/he is much more likely to catch a problem.

Stop by our pharmacy today, and bring all your medicines and natural products. We will gladly check them for you, and make sure you are treating yourself well.