

Center for Integrative Medicine

Dietary Supplements: Echinacea

Dr. Kathi Kemper's Tips

Echinacea is the common name that applies to over half a dozen species of cone flowers native to North America. The most commonly used, *Echinacea purpurea*, has purple flowers. Other commonly used species include *E. angustifolia* and *E pallida*. Different manufacturers use different parts of the plants – the flowers, stems, leaves or roots. Echinacea was one of America's most popular remedies and exports, listed on the US Pharmacopeia through 1950, but fell out of favor as more powerful antibiotics became available.

Dietary sources. You cannot get Echinacea from a normal diet. This is a plant product.

Uses. In traditional herbal medicine, it is used to stimulate the immune system. It has mostly been used to help reduce the risk and duration of respiratory infections like the common cold. Some women use it along with antifungal creams to treat vaginal yeast infections. The studies that have evaluated echinacea have used different products in different doses and have had mixed results. On the whole, *E. purpurea* may help reduce the length of a cold by a day or two in adults, but it does not have a noticeable effect on the length of children's colds. Overall, of 16 studies looking at preventing colds, there does not seem to be a significant benefit for most people from taking echinacea preventively.

Dose. Echinacea products are quite variable in the amount per 'serving' and the amount used in different studies. See the list below for some doses used in some studies showing benefits.

Safety. As with any product taken by mouth, echinacea can cause an upset stomach. It can cause tingling in the mouth, too. Studies comparing echinacea with placebo report a slightly higher rate of rash in those taking echinacea. There are rarely allergies to echinacea.

Duration. Most herbalists recommend using echinacea for no more than 8 weeks.

See **patient information** from the US National Library of Medicine:
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/natural/981.html>

Quality. No government agency routinely tests echinacea products. Dietary supplements like echinacea are regulated more like food than like drugs. There is variability in the quality of echinacea products, and you cannot always tell what is in a product from reading the label, even the fine print. We recommend using brands that have the USP stamp of approval or are approved by ConsumerLab in their independent testing.

Do not bother buying pediatric echinacea products. They contain insufficient echinacea to be effective.

Selected Products Approved by ConsumerLabs and/or used in studies that found it effective:

- Echinaforce (Bioforce AG): 2 tablets three times daily
- Echinacea Plus herbal tea (Traditional medicinals): 5-6 cups daily
- Echinagard (liquid drops): 20drops every 2 hours the first day, then 3 times daily for 10 days
- Gaia Herbs' Echinacea Supreme (made in NC) 2 capsules every 2 hours for 1 day, decreasing as the cold improves.
- MMS Pro Echinacea
- Nature Made Whole Herb Echinacea
- Nature's Bounty Whole Herb Echinacea
- Puritan's Pride Echinacea
- Rite Aid Echinacea
- Spring Valley Echinacea
- Swanson Superior Herbs
- Vitamin World Echinacea