

## Echinacea 101: The Basics

Echinacea is an herbal product that has been used in the United States for centuries. Three species of echinacea flower are most commonly used for medicinal extracts, and various parts of the plant are used in each specific product. It is most commonly used to reduce symptoms and shorten the duration of the common cold and flu, but some people also use echinacea to boost their immune system or assist with slow-healing wounds.

Current evidence supports possible benefit when used to prevent or treat the common cold, however this evidence remains controversial. Several studies examining echinacea's effects have shown significant reduction of cold symptoms in as little as 4 days of therapy and shortened cold duration an average of 2 days compared to no treatment at all. There have also been some studies that suggest using echinacea to prevent colds may reduce the incidence up to 45-58%. Despite these positive results, there are also several studies that suggest echinacea may have no significant benefit for prevention or treatment of colds. This may be due to variations in the amount, echinacea species, or plant part used in each product formulation, or due to poor and limited study designs. When possible, look for products from reputable companies that have voluntarily tested their product to ensure the stated amount of echinacea is in their formulation. Efficacy of echinacea when treating other bacterial and viral infections, hay fever (allergic rhinitis), slow-healing wounds, or for other uses has not been studied enough to provide any evidence for use, however early studies may suggest that the active components of echinacea may boost immune function, relieve pain, reduce inflammation, and have possible hormonal, antiviral, and antioxidant effects.

When using echinacea to treat infections, dosing generally recommends echinacea 3 times daily until you feel better, but not for more than 10 days. It is best taken with food or a large glass of water. Echinacea is generally well tolerated, with the most common side effects being stomach upset and rash. Some cases of severe allergic reaction have been reported, most commonly in children. People with a history of asthma or allergy to plants in the daisy family may be at higher risk of allergic reaction. People with tuberculosis, diabetes, organ transplants, any autoimmune disorders, and possibly liver disease should not use echinacea as there is a concern that it can stimulate disease activity and/or reduce the effectiveness of immunosuppressing medications. It is always important to speak with your doctor before starting new medications, including over the counter products.

For further information, talk with our knowledgeable pharmacists here at Dexter Pharmacy or visit:

<http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/herb/echinacea>

