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Herbs

Echinacea

Cone flower

What are the folklore uses of echinacea?

Traditionally, echinacea has been used to treat arthritis, colds, colic, infection, flu, wounds and snake bites. Echinacea has antibiotic, antiviral and anti-inflammatory characteristics.

What is echinacea?

Echinacea is a plant with a single purple conelike flower. Nine varieties are grown in the United States, but echinacea purpurea is the most commonly sought for medicinal purposes.

What are the proposed medicinal uses of echinacea?

Echinacea is the most widely used herb in the United States. In Europe, it has been used to treat respiratory and urinary tract infections. Taken internally, it is used to increase resistance to illness, including the common cold and sore throat. Externally, echinacea ointment is a treatment for skin wounds. The herb also has been used to treat yeast infection, rheumatoid arthritis and cancer, but its effectiveness is unproven.

How effective is echinacea?

Echinacea's beneficial effects in treating infections may result from stimulation of the immune system. Studies have shown that it increases the number of immune cells in the blood to fight colds and related ailments. It enhances the cells' ability to destroy harmful bacteria, inhibits viruses and activates other immune responses. In Germany, echinacea has been approved to treat colds, flu and upper respiratory infections.

Because echinacea is anti-inflammatory, it has been used in ointments for hard-to-heal wounds. Although it can treat a wide range of illnesses, more human studies regarding effectiveness and safety are needed.

What are the safety concerns and side effects of taking echinacea?

No significant side effects have been reported, but allergic reaction is possible, especially in people who are allergic to members of the sunflower and daisy families.

Echinacea should not be used by individuals with tuberculosis, leukosis, collagen disease, multiple sclerosis or an autoimmune disease, such as rheumatoid arthritis or lupus erythematosus. It should not be taken by pregnant women or individuals with diabetes; it could stimulate negative responses.

What are the recommended forms and dosages of echinacea?

Injection is an effective cold treatment, but is not allowed in this country. Here, echinacea is only available as a capsule, liquid or tea.

Herbal effects are dependant on the form in which the herb is taken. In Germany, echinacea capsules were shown to be least effective. The tea form is not recommended, because not all of the active compounds are water-soluble. Liquid extract is especially useful in preventing and treating the common cold and sore throat.

No uniform dose or type of echinacea preparation is available in the United States. The dosage



depends upon the potency of the particular plant used, and capsules can vary widely. For example, in the Boston area, one brand contained 75 milligrams, another 180 milligrams and the third 250 milligrams per capsule. A typical American extract containing echinacea recommends 15 to 30 drops, two to five times daily.

Limit echinacea use to eight weeks, both internally and externally. The herb's effectiveness appears to diminish after four to eight weeks. For maximum effectiveness, alternate taking echinacea with not taking it. Only buy herbs from a reputable manufacturer, and try to obtain the best quality product available.

Conclusion

While research has shown that echinacea is anti-inflammatory, has wound healing action and stimulates the immune system, its medicinal uses,

recommended dosage and form need additional study. The German Institute for Drug and Medical Devices recommends echinacea products for cold, flu and upper respiratory tract infections.

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