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Memorial Sloan Kettering
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Zinc supplementation may reduce the length of a cold when taken within 24 hours of symptoms. Studies on whether zinc can help symptoms from cancer treatment produced mixed results.

Zinc is necessary for normal cell functioning, nerve signaling, and for the body to protect against infection or disease. Scientists think that zinc lozenges may prevent the common cold virus from attaching to the nasal cavities, windpipe, and lungs.

Zinc may help reduce some symptoms caused by radiation therapy. Optimal levels of zinc may also reduce the risk of various cancers, but further study is needed.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- To prevent and treat the common cold
Data suggest that short-term use of zinc lozenges may reduce the length of a cold if started within 24 hours of cold symptoms. However, side effects including bad taste and nausea are commonly reported.
- To prevent or treat radiation therapy side effects
Results are mixed on whether zinc can preserve sense of taste or help relieve mouths sores and inflammation from radiation therapy. Additional studies are needed.
- To treat arthritis
Clinical evidence does not support the use of zinc for arthritis.
- To treat diarrhea
Data from several studies indicate that zinc may be effective in the treatment of diarrhea in children.

What are the side effects?

- Zinc lozenges can cause taste disturbances, nausea, vomiting, upset stomach, or diarrhea.
- Taking large doses can cause copper deficiency, depressed immune function, headache, chills, fever, and fatigue.

What else do I need to know?

Patient Warnings:

- Taking more than 100 mg of zinc supplements per day may increase the risk of prostate cancer.
- When taken in large doses (100–300 mg/day), zinc can cause serious and chronic problems including copper deficiency, depressed immune function, headache, chills, fever, and fatigue. Individuals should also be aware of common products that may lead to this type of excess exposure, such as zinc-containing denture adhesives.
- Intranasal zinc products used to treat colds have been removed from the market due to adverse events, and were found to damage human nasal tissue.

Do Not Take if:

- You are taking fluoroquinolones like ciprofloxacin, levofloxacin, gatifloxacin: If zinc is taken at the same time, it can decrease the availability and effectiveness of these drugs. Zinc should be taken either 2 hours before or 4 hours after these medications.
- You are taking tetracyclines like doxycycline and minocycline: If zinc is taken at the same time, it can decrease the availability and effectiveness of these drugs. Therefore, zinc should be taken either 2 hours before or 4 hours after these medications.
- You are taking drugs like penicillamine or eltrombopag for rare disorders such as Wilson's disease or chronic autoimmune thrombocytopenia: The effectiveness of these drugs can be greatly reduced.
- You take mineral or vitamin supplements: If zinc is taken at the same time, it can decrease the absorption and effectiveness of these supplements. Patients should take zinc 2 hours before or after foods high in calcium, phosphorus, iron, bran fiber, or phytates.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Zinc - Last updated on May 25, 2022

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