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# HEALTH JOURNAL

## Echinacea

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When you catch a cold or wince with the pain of an ear infection, your body is like a neighborhood invaded by unsavory characters.

In your body, viruses and [bacteria](#) are the bad guys. The cops are your white blood cells, and the S.W.A.T. team is made up of snuff-out cells called phagocytes. These specialized cells roam through your circulatory system on a special mission, ingesting and destroying specific substances, like viruses and [bacteria](#), that could do harm to your body. This process is called phagocytosis, and by the time it's complete, few foreign invaders are left in the neighborhood.

If you want to take out a [cold](#) virus or prevent an ear infection, you need the body's equivalent of a beefed-up police force. It's time to send out the call for more phagocytes—and echinacea can help you do that.

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### In the Trenches of Germ Warfare

There are several herbs that act as immunostimulants—botanical medicines that help your body fight off illness by bolstering its natural defenses. Echinacea is the best-known of these herbs and the one with the most scientific evidence behind it. This North American plant kicks your [immune](#) system into high gear. Echinacea can stop a cold, influenza, or [bacterial](#) infection before it can spread in the body. It can also shorten the duration and lessen the symptoms of the infection, says Alison Lee, M.D., a pain-management specialist and medical director of Barefoot Doctors, an alternative medicine practice in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

"I recommend that people carry a tincture of echinacea with them and start taking it as the package directs at the first sign of a cold. It's really effective right at the beginning of an infection," says Dr. Lee. Echinacea may kill some viruses and bacteria directly, but it is also known to arm the immune system to do the dirty work, she says.

### Your Immune System on Mocha Java

When you take [echinacea](#), your immune system responds as if it had just downed several cups of strong Colombian coffee. It can't sit still. Echinacea speeds up the process of phagocytosis and increases the number of white blood cells—natural killer cells—hunting down foreign particles such as viruses and bacteria in your body.



## Product Recommendations



Supports the Immune - System 3 capsules provides: 1200 mg of Echinacea - Astragalus - Reishi

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"Your natural killer cells are the cops who come and say, 'Who's in the neighborhood that doesn't belong here? Let's get rid of them,'" explains Steven Dentali, Ph.D., a natural products chemist with Dentali Associates in Troutdale, Oregon, and a member of the advisory board of the American Botanical Council.

Echinacea works on another level of the [immune](#) system as well. It seems to prevent the action of an enzyme called hyaluronidase. When you're sick, this enzyme breaks down the walls of healthy cells, allowing the invaders to get inside. By interfering with this enzyme, echinacea helps the body maintain its lines of defense in the deadly game of germ warfare, says Dr. Dentali.

"There's still some debate over the actual mechanism. Maybe it inhibits the enzyme, or perhaps it supports the cell wall so it's a more formidable barrier and harder to penetrate. No one really knows," he says, "but the result is that it seems to slow down the spread of infection in the body."

	<p>Helps fight bacterial and viral infections, boost the immune system, lower fever, and calm allergic reactions. Each Capsules provides 450 mg of Certified organically grown Echinacea purpurea and a special blend of traditional herbs, including Golden Seal root and <a href="#">Cayenne Pepper</a>, to help support a healthy lifestyle.</p> <p><a href="#">Buy</a> <a href="#">Info</a></p>
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## SUPPLEMENT PROFILE

### Echinacea

**Botanical names:** Echinacea purpurea, E. angustifolia, and E. pallida.

**May help:** Low immunity, celiac disease, diverticulitis, chronic fatigue syndrome, colds and flu, genital herpes, bronchitis, ear infections, laryngitis, and cystitis.

**Special instructions:** Use at the first signs of a cold or other infection, not as a long-term preventive.

**Origin:** Native to the Great Plains and southern United States; currently scarce in the wild but cultivated in the United States and Europe.

**Cautions and possible side effects:** Not recommended for people with autoimmune diseases such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, or multiple sclerosis. Do not use if you are allergic to plants in the daisy family, such as chamomile and marigold. Consult your doctor before using for longer than eight weeks.

Echinacea has antiviral, antifungal, anti-inflammatory, and antibacterial properties. Although taken internally, it can also be used topically on wounds or inflamed skin. It has been used to treat candida, a maddening yeast infection, and in some cases used as a mouthwash to treat gingivitis.

## Handy for Bites and Stings

There are several medicinal species of echinacea. All are native to the Great Plains and southern United States, but they are becoming scarce in the wild today due to overharvesting by paid gatherers. Some medicinal supplies come from cultivated fields in the United States and Europe.

One species, [Echinacea purpurea](#), is a herbaceous plant three to four feet in height with reddish, purple, or pinkish flowers. It is commonly called purple coneflower, black Sampson, or Kansas snakeroot. The leaves, roots, and flowers are the medicinal parts of this

plant.

North American Indians were the first to use another species, *E. angustifolia*, as a medicine to treat snakebite, toothache, sore throats, respiratory ailments, and skin wounds. In the 1700s, European settlers applied it to saddle sores on their horses.

It wasn't until a century later on the Great Plains that echinacea became better known as medicine. In Nebraska, Dr. H. C. F. Meyer created Meyer's Blood Purifier, a concoction of echinacea root extract, hops, and wormwood. Dr. Meyer touted his patent medicine as being "valuable for the bites of serpents and insect stings," and it became quite popular. Within a few decades, echinacea became the most widely used medicinal plant in the country. It got an unlooked-for marketing boost when Louis Pasteur discovered that many diseases and conditions were caused by germs. Then its advocates could say that echinacea was a germ killer.

In that era, echinacea was thought by physicians to be a treatment for many infectious diseases. By the 1930s, however, it fell out of favor, partly because some of its supporters linked it with the outdated idea that germs were generated spontaneously within the blood.

## Meanwhile, in Germany . . .

While Americans' interest waned, however, Europeans' continued. Researchers from one German company started to import echinacea seeds from North America. Eventually, they discovered that they were growing and testing *E. purpurea* rather than *E. angustifolia*, which was the most widely used species. As a result, nearly all of the scientific research conducted with echinacea in the last 50 years has been on that species. Most of those studies use a formulated ethanol extract—that is, an extract mixed with alcohol. The medicinal extract is made from the aerial parts (leaves and flowers) of the plant.

In Germany in 1994, there were more than 300 echinacea preparations on the market, and doctors wrote 2.5 million prescriptions for this herb alone.

"It's funny how, in the early part of this century, echinacea was widely used by Americans. It was in most people's medicine cabinets, and then it fell out of fashion," says Dr. Dentali. "Now, it's back, partly because it's been proven safe and effective in Germany."

## Special Effects

Although dozens of studies prove echinacea's effectiveness as an [immune](#) stimulator, scientists still aren't certain which active ingredients are responsible. Some evidence, however, points to a group of polysaccharides, a combination of different kinds of sugar molecules. By conducting lab tests and injecting the plant sugars directly into humans, researchers have found that polysaccharides increase phagocytosis.

In addition, echinacea contains many other compounds that seem to have antiviral properties and a gearing-up effect on the immune system. "With herbs, it not always possible to isolate all of the active ingredients," says Dr. Dentali. But the research on echinacea is leading to a better understanding of how it works, he points out.

As for which species of [echinacea](#) is the more powerful medicine for your immune system, that isn't known yet. Suffice it to say that the major medicinal species of echinacea appear to have similar benefits. Perhaps the species of the future will be a hybrid.

## Picking Your Fighters

In health food stores, you'll probably find dozens of [echinacea](#) products. The herb comes as a tincture, a freeze-dried extract in capsules or tablets, and a simple herb powder packaged in capsules.

Look at the labels carefully, says Jennifer Brett, N.D., a naturopathic doctor at the Wilton Naturopathic Center in Stratford, Connecticut. There have been problems with adulteration—that is, replacing echinacea with less potent herbs. The ground-up roots of Missouri snakeroot are sometimes passed off as echinacea.

Your best bet is to look for a label that says explicitly that the product contains the leaves and flowers of *E. purpurea* or the roots of *E. angustifolia*. Sometimes, you'll find products containing both varieties as well as *E. pallida*. If you do, that's fine.

"Echinacea tincture also has a distinctive buzz to it. The more root in the mixture, the stronger the sting," says Dr. Dentali. "It ought to make your tongue tingle and numb your mouth."

## A Dose Will Do You

At the onset of a cold or flu, you may want to take an extra amount to kick your immune system into overdrive, says Dr. Brett. In the first 24 hours of an illness, she recommends two capsules every 4 hours or 30 drops of tincture every 3 hours.

The revved-up effect, however, is short-lived. Research suggests that echinacea loses its effectiveness with continuous use. Consequently, you will want to use it only when you feel a cold coming on or when your immune system is weakened by stress, says Dr. Brett.

"It's not a good idea to take this on a daily basis. If everyone in your office is sick, however, and you have no doubt that you're going to get sick, you can take it as a prophylactic," she says. "Just remember that it's most potent in those first few days that you take it."

If you have an autoimmune disease such as lupus or rheumatoid arthritis, you should be cautious, says Dr. Lee. "These diseases are partly due to an already overactive immune system. Anything that stimulates the immune system may, in theory, be harmful," she says. "You may be able to use echinacea really short-term, but I'd consider other choices, such as zinc."



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& Flu  
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