



THE NATURAL APPROACH TO  
**WINTER'S ILLS**

By Emily Devon.

RETAIL PHARMACY ASSISTANTS • MAY 2021

**T**here's nothing like cold and flu season in the pharmacy. Flu vaccines are being administered left, right and centre. People are stocking up on tissues and cold and flu tablets. It's all happening.

It's especially important to promote cold-relief products in the year following that of the pandemic outbreak, with coughs and colds having dropped to the bottom of people's priority lists.

However, it's also important to emphasise the alternative therapies available in a pharmacy, which can help strengthen the immune system and help prevent people from becoming susceptible to coughs and colds.

"We tend to reach out for a quick fix for coughs and colds, with paracetamol, a decongestant and an antihistamine," Melbourne pharmacist, integrative medicine expert and author Vanita Dahia said. "One can increase the recovery time and reduce the severity of the cough or cold during the flu season by boosting the immune system."

#### VMS for the immune system

Here, Ms Dahia outlines the role of vitamins, minerals and supplements (VMS) that are said to be most effective in helping reduce the severity of cold symptoms.

#### Vitamin C

"The immune system is dependent on vitamin C and minerals to help regulate the severity of infections and the degree of inflammation," Ms Dahia said.

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"Vitamin C reduces the incidence of the common cold and other respiratory infections, such as pneumonia and bronchitis."

While there are vitamin C supplements available in a pharmacy, it's helpful to include a diet with vitamin C-rich food sources, such as blackcurrants, citrus fruits, berries, tomatoes, broccoli, sprouts and capsicums to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

"A combination of zinc and vitamin C and bioflavonoids, such as quercetin, can be effective at boosting the immune system and protecting the body against coughs and colds during the flu season," Ms Dahia said.

#### Trial

A systematic review and meta-analysis of vitamin C supplementation, published in 2018 in *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, examined

the effect vitamin C has on the common cold.<sup>2</sup> The researchers found that regular supplementation in adults reduced the severity and duration of common colds by eight per cent, and in children, by 14 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the study authors found that supplementation with vitamin C "may be beneficial for some subjects doing heavy exercise who have problems with frequent upper respiratory infections".<sup>2</sup>

#### Zinc

Much like vitamin C, zinc is considered one of "the foundational nutrients for immune support", according to Ms Dahia.

"Zinc plays a major role in reducing antibody production and natural killer cell activity," she said.

A 2011 meta-analysis published in *The Journal of Family Practice* shows that

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zinc supplementation can reduce the duration and severity of a cold, if the course is commenced early on.<sup>3</sup>

Two prevention trials found that zinc can reduce the incidence of colds in children, whether it's taken as a syrup or in tablet form.<sup>3</sup>

Foods that are high in zinc include meat, shellfish, legumes, seeds, nuts, dairy, eggs and wholegrains.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Vitamin D**

“Another vitamin worth making mention of is vitamin D,” Ms Dahia said.

“Vitamin D is not just good for bones. It [also] supports the immune system by stimulating antimicrobial activity of the white cells in the blood to fight against infections.”

Vitamin D became a hot topic in 2020 when it was suggested that it could help in the prevention and management of Covid-19.<sup>7</sup>

So, is it true that vitamin D can help reduce cold symptoms?

New studies suggest that ‘the sunshine vitamin’ helps boost immunity. However, not many foods are rich in vitamin D, and many people try not to stay in the sun for too long.<sup>5</sup>



Therefore, suggesting a multivitamin with vitamin D included, is a viable option.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Trial**

Looking at the effects of vitamin D supplementation on the duration and severity of the common cold, the systematic review and meta-analysis published in 2018 in *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, found that “vitamin D supplementation is safe and may protect against acute respiratory tract infections overall”.<sup>2</sup> However, the study authors add that while vitamin D was found to be protective, “there are numerous studies that do not support

this indication” warranting “further research on the dosage of intake of vitamin D and prevention/treatment of common cold”.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Herbal medicines**

“Herbal medicines have become available in pharmacy as effective therapeutics agents,” Ms Dahia said. “Some immune boosting herbs may include echinacea, olive leaf, astragalus, andrographis and elderberry.”

Andrographis, she says, “has been shown to be as effective as paracetamol at reducing fever and sore throat”, a finding presented in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*.

"Today, commercial cough mixtures containing herbs such as *Sambucus nigra*, or elderberry extract, not only alleviate coughs but also reduce flu-like symptoms," Ms Dahia said.

Randomised, placebo controlled trials demonstrated that the combination of echinacea purpurea, zinc, selenium and vitamin C may alleviate exacerbation symptoms in 108 chronic obstructive pulmonary disease patients with acute upper respiratory tract infections.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Ms Dahia adds, herbal medicines can be considered safe, as they're "effective therapeutic agents [that] boost the immune system, [but] should be used with professional advice as they may interact with some prescription medicines".

#### Other tips

While vitamins, minerals and herbs can play a significant role in reducing the severity of cold symptoms, there are other alternative therapies to keep in mind.

"Of course, one needs to keep the fluids up and maintain a healthy,

wholesome diet," Ms Dahia said. "Hydrating the nasal passages with saline spray together with inhaling water can relieve congestion and be beneficial in managing coughs and colds.

"Steam inhalation of essential oils such as peppermint tea, tea tree, lemon, eucalyptus can offer relief for congestion, rhinitis and sinusitis."

A wide variety of alternative therapies are available in a pharmacy to help soothe a cold, but it's also worth mentioning some of the therapies that can be accessed via the local supermarket.

**Ginger:** may help soothe a cough or sore throat.<sup>6</sup>

**Honey:** includes antibacterial and antimicrobial properties.<sup>6</sup>

**Garlic:** contains the compound allicin, and can help reduce cold symptoms.<sup>6</sup>

**Salt water:** gargling salt water can help ease a sore throat.<sup>6</sup>

**Vapor rub:** applying before bed can help open air passages.<sup>6</sup>

"Winter is a time of coughs and colds and other infections lurking around," Ms Dahia said. "Pharmacy assistants are well placed to encourage the use of natural medicines to boost the immune system and support the customer by speeding up their recovery."

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