



National Prescribing Service Limited

Australia's peak, independent, education and information provider about medicines

Fact sheet

May 2005

The cold hard facts

FACT: Antibiotics won't help a common cold. Antibiotics have no effect on viruses – they are used to treat infections caused by bacteria. The common cold is caused by viruses.

FACT: Vitamin C may have a small effect on how long common cold symptoms last but has never been shown to prevent a cold.¹

FACT: Echinacea products vary in their effect. There are many products and there is no standard formula. Therefore some products have been tested while others haven't. There is no recommended dose and no consistent dose. Generally most echinacea products have been shown not to be effective in preventing colds or reducing symptoms.¹

FACT: Flu vaccinations will not help you fight the common cold this winter and do not prevent you from getting a common cold. It is helpful against the specific strain of influenza the vaccination has been designed to help. However flu vaccinations are available and are recommended for older people, people with chronic illnesses, pregnant women and people who live in nursing homes. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for more information and ask if you should be vaccinated.

FACT: The common cold and influenza are very different illnesses. If you have a cold your symptoms are usually confined to the nose and throat only. The flu is a much more serious illness; symptoms include nose and throat and chest irritation, severe body aches and pains, high fever, shivering and you are more than likely to feel sick enough to want to go to bed.

FACT: If you have coloured mucus or nasal discharge it means your immune system is fighting the infection. It does not always mean that you have a bacterial infection.

FACT: Studies have shown that approximately 2/3 of all children with a middle ear infection (acute otitis media) without pus were pain-free within 1 day regardless of whether they received antibiotics or not.²

FACT: Studies have shown that approximately 70% of patients with acute sinusitis will get better without using antibiotics.³

FACT: Studies have shown that approximately 85% of patients with acute bronchitis get better without antibiotics.⁴

FACT: Between 85-95% of sore throats in adults are caused by viruses.⁵

FACT: A common cold can last for between 5 and 7 days and often takes up to 3 weeks to feel completely well.⁶

FACT: Sneezing doesn't just occur when you have a cold, some people sneeze when they pluck their eyebrows, or go out into the sun.⁷

FACT: Children can get 5-10 colds per year (2-4 in adults/year). A cough is often the last thing to improve and can last 1-2 weeks longer than the other symptoms.⁶

FACT: Studies have shown that about 90% of patients with sore throat were symptom free at one week, whether they received antibiotics or not.⁸

FACT: Studies have shown that countries with greater use of antibiotics have higher levels of antibiotic resistance.⁹

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