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Echinacea

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... is one of the most widely used botanicals. Its primary use has been in the treatment of the common cold or when immune system enhancement is desired. Clinical and experimental studies have confirmed the validity of this use. Most of the clinical data has featured the stabilized fresh-pressed juice of *Echinacea purpurea*. Products standardized for beta-1,2-D-fructofuranosides may offer the highest degree of quality assurance.

History and folk use

Echinacea was used by the Native Americans against more illnesses than any other plant. The roots were the portion of the plant most often used. It was used externally for the healing of wounds, burns, abscesses, and insect bites; internally it was used for infections, toothache and joint pains.

A commercial product containing echinacea was introduced to Americans around 1870 by H.C.F. Meyer, a German lay physician, who recommended it as a wonder cure called "Meyer's blood purifier." Meyer recommended it for almost every conceivable malady, and there were numerous case reports of successful treatments for snake bites, typhus, diphtheria, and other infections. For a number of reasons, interest in echinacea decreased in America between the 1930s and 1980s. Fortunately, this waning was offset by the tremendous interest from European physicians. Much of



the research has featured preparation from the fresh juice of the above-ground (aerial portion) of echinacea purpurea.

The pharmacology

The chemistry, pharmacology and clinical applications of echinacea have been the subject of over 350 scientific studies. The over-whelming majority of the clinical studies have utilized the extract of the juice of the aerial portion *E. purpurea* along with 22 percent ethanol (for preservation).

Echinacea has yielded an assortment of chemical constituents with immune enhancing activity. This finding implies that the broader the chemical composition of the medicinal preparation, the greater the effect based on possible synergistic effects among constituents. Preparations of the fresh-pressed juice of *E. purpurea* are believed by many experts to offer the greatest benefit, presumably by providing a full-range of active



compounds. One group of compounds in echinacea with powerful immune enhancing activity is beta-1,2-S-fructofuranoside.

Standardizing the product for these compounds provides a guarantee that the plant was harvested in the blossom stage, the product was carefully prepared and suffered no enzymatic or microbiological degradation, and the product is stabilized. Preparations standardized to contain a minimum of 2.4 percent of beta-1,2-t-fructo-furanosides are now available in the United States.

Clinical applications

Numerous clinical studies have confirmed echinacea's immune enhancing actions. It is interesting to note that echinacea's major effect on the immune system is the activation of macrophages. The white blood cells responsible for engulfing and destroying viruses, bacteria, yeast, cancer cells, and other particulate matter. What makes this interesting is that because it is largely the role of macrophages to purify the blood, it appears that echinacea was and is in fact a blood purifier.

Echinacea has shown good clinical results in many infectious conditions including influenza, colds, upper respiratory tract infections, urogenital infections, and chronic candida infections. Although many of the earlier studies utilized injectable preparations, recent studies have shown oral preparations yield similar, if not better, results. For example, in one study when echinacea was injected into healthy males on four successive days, it was shown to increase the activity of white blood cells by nearly 50 percent, while the oral administration of echinacea at a dose of 105 ml, three times daily to healthy males for five consecutive days resulted in an increase of 120 percent.

Perhaps the most popular use of echinacea is in the treatment of the common cold. There is ample evidence in the scientific literature support this use. In



addition, there is evidence that echinacea can also prevent colds. For example, in a double-blind, placebo-controlled trial conducted in Germany, the immune-stimulating effects of the freshly pressed juice from *E. purpurea* was evaluated on the course and severity of colds in patients with increased susceptibility to colds and low immune function over a period of eight weeks. A total of 108 patients (54 received echinacea, 54 received placebo) were evaluated.

The study's results indicated that preventive treatment with the stabilized fresh-pressed juice of *E. purpurea* (4 ml, twice daily) produced a decreased frequency of infection. This preventive effect was evident in the number of patients remaining healthy (echinacea group 35.02 percent, placebo 25.9 percent) as well as in the length of time between infections (echinacea group 40 days, placebo 25 days). When infections did occur in the group receiving echinacea, they were less severe and resolved quicker. Patients showing laboratory evidence of a weakened immune system benefited the most from echinacea.

In general, echinacea appears to offer benefit for all infectious conditions. An exception to this statement may be acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). It is unclear at this time if echinacea should be recommended for AIDS. Although this condition is associated with wide-spread depression of the

immune system presumably due to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), stimulation of some immune system functions (such as T-cell replication) may stimulate replication of the virus as well.

Summary

Echinacea is one of the most widely used botanicals. Its primary clinical applications have been used in cases of infections or when immune system enhancement is desired. Clinical and experimental investigations have confirmed these applications. Although most of the clinical data is based on injectable formulations, oral administration is thought to yield similar results over time. In fact, there is some evidence indicating oral administration may have a more profound effect on macrophage activity.