

herbs at a glance

Echinacea



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This fact sheet provides basic information about echinacea—common names, what the science says, potential side effects and cautions, and resources for more information.

Common Names—echinacea, purple coneflower, coneflower, American coneflower

Latin Names—*Echinacea purpurea*, *Echinacea angustifolia*, *Echinacea pallida*

There are nine known species of echinacea, all of which are native to the United States and southern Canada. The most commonly used is *Echinacea purpurea*. Echinacea has traditionally been used for colds, flu, and other infections, based on the idea that it might stimulate the immune system to more effectively fight infection. Less common folk or traditional uses of echinacea include for wounds and skin problems, such as acne or boils.

The aboveground parts of the plant and roots of echinacea are used fresh or dried to make teas, squeezed (expressed) juice, extracts, or preparations for external use.

What the Science Says

- Study results are mixed on whether echinacea can **prevent** or effectively **treat** upper respiratory tract infections such as the common cold. For example, two NCCAM-funded studies did not find a benefit from echinacea, either as *Echinacea purpurea* fresh-pressed juice for treating colds in children, or as an unrefined mixture of *Echinacea angustifolia* root and *Echinacea purpurea* root and herb in adults. However, other studies have shown that echinacea may be beneficial in treating upper respiratory infections.
- NCCAM is continuing to support the study of echinacea for the treatment of upper respiratory infections. NCCAM is also studying echinacea for its potential effects on the immune system.

Side Effects and Cautions

- When taken by mouth, echinacea usually does not cause side effects. However, some people experience allergic reactions, including rashes, increased asthma, and anaphylaxis (a life-threatening allergic reaction). In clinical trials, gastrointestinal side effects were most common.

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- People are more likely to experience allergic reactions to echinacea if they are allergic to related plants in the daisy family, which includes ragweed, chrysanthemums, marigolds, and daisies. Also, people with asthma or atopy (a genetic tendency toward allergic reactions) may be more likely to have an allergic reaction when taking echinacea.
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary health practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care. For tips about talking with your health care providers about complementary and alternative medicine, see NCCAM's Time to Talk campaign at nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/.

Sources

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For More Information

Visit the NCCAM Web site at nccam.nih.gov and view *Using Dietary Supplements Wisely* (nccam.nih.gov/health/supplements/wisecase.htm).

NCCAM Clearinghouse

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Echinacea Listing: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/natural/981.html

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