

Zinc and Reducing Cold Symptoms

Though not found to prevent colds, zinc has been shown to be effective for reducing the severity and duration of symptoms of the common cold by about 50%.¹

In this study, 50 volunteers were recruited within 24 hours of developing symptoms of the common cold. They were administered one zinc lozenge (12.8 mg zinc acetate) or placebo every two to three hours as long as they experienced symptoms. Symptom scores for sore throat, nasal discharge and congestion, sneezing, cough, scratchy throat, hoarseness, muscle ache, fever, and headache were recorded daily for 12 days.

The results:

- Administration of zinc lozenges reduced duration and severity of cold symptoms compared with placebo.
- Duration of cold symptoms was 4.5 days in the zinc group vs. 8.1 days in the placebo group,
- Cough duration was 3.1 days vs. 6.3 days.
- Nasal discharge was 4.1 days vs. 5.8 days.
- Overall, severity scores for all symptoms were reduced with zinc administration compared to placebo.

When and why does zinc help?

Of ten previous controlled trials on treatment of the common cold with zinc lozenges, five reported that zinc lozenges reduced the duration of cold symptoms. The studies that showed a beneficial effect used doses divided over the entire day. A consistent (100 mg or more in divided doses) amount needed to suppress a cold because zinc ions are first bound to capillary walls and only when these binding sites are full can zinc then get to other structures, including viruses. When positive zinc ions bind to the rhinovirus surface, the virus is then unable to attach to respiratory lining.

Though there are side effects of long term high dose zinc intake, sucking on zinc lozenges that total 100-150 mg a day of zinc for a week when infected by a cold virus will not result in a systemic zinc overload.

For zinc lozenges to work, you must

- use a type with a high percentage of positive ions, and
- let them dissolve in your mouth every hour or two all day, every day, until you feel better.
- If you are not feeling better in 7-10 days, consult your doctor.

Though the acetate form is believed to be better absorbed, the previous positive studies used zinc gluconate. Consequently, most of commercial zinc lozenges are zinc gluconate. If you can find a zinc acetate I would use it.

1. Prasad AS, Fitzgerald JT, Beck FWJ, et al. Duration of symptoms and plasma cytokine levels in patients with the common cold treated with zinc acetate. *Annals of Internal Medicine* 2000;133, pp245-52.

