

Part II

INFECTION OF SPECIFIC ORGAN SYSTEMS

9. UPPER AIRWAY INFECTIONS

THE COMMON COLD

James D. Cherry

The common cold is an acute, communicable, viral disease characterized by nasal stuffiness, sneezing, coryza, throat irritation, and no or minimal fever. Although the terms URI (upper respiratory infection) and nasopharyngitis are used frequently as synonyms for the common cold by physicians and other health workers, the practice should be discouraged; URI is much too broad a term, and pharyngitis is not present in the majority of colds. To add to the confusion regarding terminology, the term "a cold" frequently has an even more inclusive connotation to the lay person.

In recent years the greatest controversy related to the common cold has been over the efficacy of vitamin C, both prophylactically and therapeutically. In two carefully controlled volunteer studies, the administration of 3 g of ascorbic acid per day did not prevent or alter the symptomatology of experimental colds.^{63, 70} In addition, during the last 10 years, there have been several large controlled trials in which vitamin C and placebo preparations have been used to prevent and to treat clinically induced colds.^{1, 13, 21, 22, 29, 50, 60} In some of these studies a degree of benefit was reported, while in others no efficacy was noted. **It is most probable that the reported benefits are a result of statistical artifacts and placebo effect due to poor study design rather than specific pharmacologic drug effects.** However, it is probable that the antihistaminic action of vitamin C^{69, 73} afforded relief to some persons with allergic rhinitis who thought that their illnesses were colds. Since there are many toxic effects of ascorbic acid,⁸ and its use in respiratory illnesses at best is questionable, it would seem unwarranted to give children vitamin C in excess of normal daily requirements.

50. Karlowski, T. R., Chalmers, T. C, Frenkel, L. D., et al.: Ascorbic acid for the common cold. A prophylactic and therapeutic trial. *J.A.M.A.* 231:1038-1042, 1975.

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