

Vitamin C and the Common Cold *continued*

CONSUMER CAUTION most scientists have dismissed the idea that doses of vitamin C can benefit people in this way.⁶ Today, though, some are seriously discussing the possibility that vitamin C may actually be effective.

The idea that taking vitamin C supplements reduces the severity and duration of colds was put forth in 1970 by a respected physicist, Dr. Linus Pauling.⁷ A spate of studies followed, and in 1975 a physician reviewed many of them.⁸ He found that, statistically, takers of vitamin C did indeed suffer fewer and milder colds than takers of placebos. The difference averaged one-tenth of one cold per year, and one tenth of one day per cold in favor of the vitamin C-takers. While such a measurable difference is cause for great excitement among laboratory scientists, a person hearing about it wouldn't think the gain worth considering.

Statistics may, however, pool together all of the results and report only the average occurrence. The statistics just mentioned might give the impression that every single subject taking vitamin C who also caught a cold suffered exactly 2½ hours fewer than control subjects receiving no vitamin C. This is not the case, however. In human terms, some vitamin C takers probably suffered just as long and some even longer than the controls; others probably found relief much sooner. The average worked out to be slight, but for *individuals* the results might have been dramatic. It could also be true that some individuals began the study in a vitamin-C deprived state, and that, of these people, the ones who received the lacking vitamin enjoyed a greatly boosted immune response, changing the average for the group. While all these things are possible, none are proven. The point here is that early studies remain inconclusive.

One certainty is that the placebo effect is always at work. A questionnaire given at the end of one study revealed that a number of the subjects had made guesses concerning the contents of their capsules. Subjects who had actually received the placebo, but who believed they were receiving vitamin C, experienced *fewer* colds than the group who had received the vitamin but believed they had received the placebo.

Notes

7. L. C. Pauling, *Vitamin C and the Common Cold* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1970).
8. T. C. Chalmers, Effects of ascorbic acid on the common cold, *American Journal of Medicine* 58 (1975): 532-536.

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