

Health Supplements Information Service



THE HEALTH SUPPLEMENTS INFORMATION REAFFIRMS THE BENEFITS OF MICRONUTRIENTS FOR THE HEALTH OF THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

In response to a review in the British Nutrition Foundation Nutrition Bulletin regarding supplements and colds,¹ the Health Supplements Information Service (HSIS) would like to make the following comment:

Dr Carrie Ruxton, independent dietitian and advisor to HSIS, notes: “This review evaluated the role of single nutrient supplements in the prevention of colds, with an emphasis on high dose supplements. Consideration was given to evidence relating to vitamin C, zinc, vitamin E, selenium, vitamin A and iron from already published studies, so it is not a new study.

“The overall conclusions of the review were, quite correctly, that deficiency of micronutrients will impair the immune system. However, the review failed to make the point that that significant numbers of adults and children in the UK do have poor intakes of micronutrients. The Government’s own National Diet and Nutrition Surveys (NDNS) has shown that certain people across all age groups have low intakes of several micronutrients, particularly iron which is key in the maintenance of a normal immune function. While low intakes could be addressed by healthier diets, evidence continues to show that diets are only improving very slowly. Data from the latest NDNS published earlier this year indicate that there have been no significant improvements in the intakes of vitamins and minerals since the last surveys.²³ A daily multivitamin supplement can make good this dietary gap.

¹ Weichselbaum, E. Can supplements help prevent or treat a common cold? British Nutrition Foundation Nutrition Bulletin 2010;35:26-29

² Bates B, Lennox A, Swan G. National Diet and Nutrition Survey. Headline results from year 1 of the Rolling Programme (2008/2009). A survey carried out on behalf of the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Health. Available: <http://www.food.gov.uk/science/dietarysurveys/ndnsdocuments/ndns0809year1>

³ Mason. Towards a healthier Britain. London: Proprietary Association of Great Britain, 2008. This document provides details of vitamin and mineral intakes from previous NDNS in adults and children

“Turning to specific nutrients, as mentioned in the BNF review, regular vitamin C supplementation does tend to reduce the duration of common colds in both adults and children. Vitamin C supplementation can also reduce the risk of colds in people subject to physical stress such as marathon runners or skiers by as much as 50%.

“Other nutrients such as zinc, vitamin E and selenium play a vital role in maintaining a normal immune system. Low levels of these nutrients are known to impair immunity and can increase the susceptibility to infection.

“In summary, micronutrients are essential for the health of all body systems, including the immune system. Given the evidence that many people do not have adequate vitamin and mineral intakes, a multivitamin supplement can help to maintain overall health as well as the efficiency of the immune system. “

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