

Does a diet full of vitamin C really prevent you from catching a cold?

By Stuart Marsh
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It turns out that vitamin C can't really stem your sniffles. (image) iStock

Every winter the same thing happens. It starts with a sneeze, and then it transforms into a snuffle, and then you're suddenly facing a torrid river of snot streaming down your face.

Yes – coming down with the common cold sucks, and when it comes to treatment most people would recommend a triple combo of over-the-counter drugs, lots of sleep and a healthy overdose of vitamin C.

But is munching your way through a shopping trolley full of oranges really the key to preventing – or fixing – the common winter cold?

According to the experts, the idea that vitamin C can treat or prevent a cold is one of the most persistent myths ever invented.

"In brief, for almost all people in most situations, the answer is no," says [Dr Michael Tam](#), a Sydney-based GP and lecturer at the University of New South Wales."

"Taking vitamin C on a regular basis, regardless of dose, does not reduce the likelihood of the common cold in the general population."



I already have a cold... can increasing my consumption of vitamin C make it go away quicker?

So we know that mainlining our veins with orange juice is unlikely to do anything other than make you pee a lot (and dramatically [increase your sugar intake](#)), but what about if you already have a cold – is it enough to at least *slow* down the cascade of sneezes?

No, says Tam, and that conclusion comes with an enormous amount of research that's struggled to find any proof that every mum's favourite vitamin can change the way we feel when suffering from the sniffles.

"In terms of taking vitamin C as 'treatment' during an episode of a cold, the Cochrane systematic review found no consistent effect on the duration or severity of cold symptoms," Tam tells ninemsn Coach.

"The most likely explanation is that it doesn't work."

[The Cochrane systematic review](#) was undertaken in 2012 by Harri Hemila and Elizabeth Chalker – two scientists who took on the unenviable task of trawling through almost 50 years of trials which involved vitamin C and its effects on the common cold.

Their conclusion was that routinely supplementing your diet with vitamin C – that is popping a little orange pill every day to ward off the flu – was "not justified" by science.

Interestingly, the researchers found that the only group of people who benefited from added vitamin C supplementation (when treating a cold) were those who were undertaking extremely arduous physical ordeals – think marathon runners, soldiers on multi-day arctic operations and long-distance skiers.

Is it possible to take too much vitamin C?

Just because vitamin C may not be the heavenly sent cold cure we've all been dreaming of, doesn't mean the vitamin itself should be completely shunned from our diet.

As a water-soluble vitamin and a powerful antioxidant, vitamin C helps your cells heal themselves,

particularly when it comes to things like your skin, blood vessels and bones.

So surely there's no harm in upping your dose of vitamin C just to make sure all of your bases are covered, right? Not so, says Tam – but to cause yourself damage requires you to somehow intravenously inject an absolute shipload of vitamin C.

"It is possible to take too much, but in general vitamin C has quite a low toxicity," says Tam.

"The most common side-effects from taking large doses generally relate to gastrointestinal symptoms – diarrhoea, abdominal cramps – due to unabsorbed vitamin C in the bowel."

As Tam explains, in extremely rare cases where people have *literally* mainlined the good stuff straight into their veins, it can even cause some major organs to shut down.

"Rarely, high dose vitamin C has been associated with acute kidney failure, but that's been in the setting of intravenous vitamin C," advises Tam.

So where does the vitamin C myth come from (and why won't it go away)?

Whether it's co-workers, family or even your own mother, everybody seems to believe that vitamin C tablets either stop you from catching a cold – or at the very least, reduce the severity of its symptoms.

The myth has its origins from our very own naval history, where ships making the journey from Britain to Australia would be stocked full of lemons and limes ([both rich in vitamin C](#)) to prevent people on board falling ill to scurvy.

Another clue is that the first signs of scurvy include fatigue, loss of appetite and nausea – not unlike the symptoms of the common cold. It becomes fairly easy to see how, once safely arrived on solid land, many people would equate the eating of citrus fruits as being somehow able to cure a case of the sniffles.

But according to Tam, the whole idea of using oranges to snuff out excess snot didn't really capture mainstream attention until the early 1970s.

"The myth got a major boost in the '70s and '80s when Linus Pauling extensively promoted vitamin C as having major health benefits," says Tam.

Linus Pauling was an infamous American chemist – and winner of two Nobel prizes – who published a book in 1970 called [Vitamin C and the Common Cold](#). In it, he advocated megadoses of vitamin C – some four times greater than the daily recommended amount – for people wishing to live longer and feel better.

His work has since been much derided by scientists and physicians, who know now that the link between vitamin C and its cold-curing capability was greatly overplayed – but at the time, it was a sensational discovery that many media outlets picked up on.

So next time your mother offers you some vitamin C tablets to help you get over a cold, calmly explain to her (between sneezes, of course) about the findings of the Cochrane systematic review – she'll probably nod her head and think that this cold really is worse than she first thought.