Zinc and Your Health

By Dr. Ramona Warren

With cold season upon us, many people will be reaching for zinc to fight cold symptoms -- and for good reason. Studies have shown that taking zinc lozenges or supplements at the onset of a cold can help speed recovery. But zinc does much more than just support the immune system. This trace mineral is crucial for our overall health.

Many of the biological functions of the body, such as immune function, reproduction, hormonal balance, blood sugar levels, cholesterol levels, blood pressure and digestion are dependent on zinc. Zinc also has a detoxification effect on the body and keeps toxins from building up in the tissues. Zinc has been shown to help with Alzheimer's by helping eliminate heavy metal buildup in the brain. (Aluminum is one of the main toxic metals associated with Alzheimer's.)

Zinc functions in more enzymatic reactions than any other mineral. Enzymes need minerals and vitamins in order to work properly. If an enzyme is lacking the necessary mineral, it cannot perform the appropriate action, no matter how much of the vitamin is available. An example of this is our vision. For the visual process, the enzyme that activates vitamin A needs zinc. If zinc isn't present, then vitamin A cannot be converted to its active form and night-blindness can develop.

Unfortunately, zinc deficiency has become more common than people realize. Experts believe up to 2 billion people worldwide may be zinc deficient. Zinc deficiency is not just found among the malnourished people of developing countries, rather it is quite prevalent in the U.K. and the United States. Some doctors estimate that over 75 percent of their patients are suffering with low zinc levels.

The risk for zinc deficiency increases if you are of advanced age, have diabetes, consume alcohol or follow a vegetarian diet. Other factors that increase your risk for deficiency include H. pylori infection and the use of zinc depleting drugs, such as antacids, anti-inflammatory drugs, birth control, several cardiovascular medications, diuretics and ulcer medications. People with digestive problems and low stomach acid, as well as women on hormone replacement therapy or the birth control pill, are also at greater risk of deficiency.

Recent studies are showing that zinc deficiency is associated with not only a decline in immune system function, but also systemic inflammation. Inflammation in the body is the root of many degenerative diseases, such as cancer, arthritis, heart disease, autoimmune diseases and diabetes. Inflammation also accelerates the aging process, especially of the brain, arteries and eyes.

Some common symptoms of zinc deficiency include:

* Loss of the sense of taste and smell
* Macular degeneration
* Frequent colds and viruses
* Atrial fibrillation
* Fatigue
* Fever blisters
* Warts
* Slow wound healing
* Skin rashes
* Acne
* Eczema
* Dandruff
* Poor memory

• Sleep disturbances

* White spots on the fingernails
* Hair loss
* Prostate enlargement
* Hormonal imbalance

Zinc is used up through a variety of metabolic processes and needs to be replenished regularly. Some of the best food sources of zinc include oysters (the highest concentration of zinc) beef, liver, eggs, fish, shellfish, legumes, beans, nuts and seeds, especially pumpkin seeds. Zinc from animal sources is absorbed easier than from plant sources.

When supplementing with zinc you must be cautious because too much zinc can lead to zinc toxicity. The recommended daily allowance for adult males is 11 milligrams and 8 milligrams for adult females. However, studies show that only about 30 percent of the zinc consumed is actually absorbed. Therefore, zinc supplementation of 15-30 milligrams daily is recommended, especially for those who are vegetarians or do not eat many animal foods. Those who have H. Pylori or low stomach acid will also need to have higher levels of supplementation.

Signs that you might be getting too much zinc include loss of appetite, poor immune function, headaches, nausea, diarrhea, and vomiting. Scientists suggest you perform a zinc test to measure your level, and then supplement accordingly. Once you start taking zinc, you should do another test six to eight weeks later to monitor your levels.