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Echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea*) and Pregnancy

This sheet talks about the risks that exposure to echinacea can have during pregnancy. With each pregnancy, all women have a 3% to 5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your health care provider.

What is echinacea?

Echinacea is an herbal medication obtained from the roots, stem, and leaves of the perennial plant *Echinacea purpurea* (Purple coneflower). Dried rhizomes and roots of *Echinacea angustifolia* or *Echinacea pallida* are also used. This herbal medication has many components including glycoproteins, alkamides, polyacetylene flavonoids, caffeic acid derivatives, polysaccharides, and volatile oils. The concentration of the active ingredients depends on the type of echinacea and part of the plant used. When administered as a tincture, the product may contain significant concentrations of alcohol.

The type and amount of active ingredients may vary widely. In the United States, echinacea is characterized as a “dietary supplement.” Unlike a prescription medication, it is not regulated by the Federal Drug Administration and does not have set standards for preparation, safety, or degree of effectiveness.

What is echinacea used for?

Echinacea is most commonly taken orally to stimulate the immune system and in treatment of colds and other upper respiratory infections. It is of interest that a recent study found that echinacea had no clinical benefit in preventing or treating the common cold. Echinacea has also been used to stimulate the immune system following chemotherapy, to treat other conditions such as infections of the

urinary tract, and is applied topically for wounds and burns.

What are the side effects associated with echinacea?

The most common adverse reaction in adults is allergic reactions in people sensitive to plants belonging to the daisy family. Other side effects include possible activation of autoimmune disorders such as multiple sclerosis and collagen disease. Prolonged use of the agent (more than 8 weeks) is not recommended and may cause immune suppression or liver problems.

I am taking echinacea, but I would like to stop taking it before becoming pregnant. How long does echinacea stay in your body?

We do not know how long echinacea stays in the body as the half-life of echinacea is not known (half-life refers to how long it takes your body to metabolize half of the dose of the medication). It is likely that levels of echinacea would be low after a few days, but there are no studies regarding this. A safe approach would be to discontinue the medication one month before attempting to get pregnant. As always, it would be important to speak with your health care provider regarding the benefits of taking this medication for your specific situation, and any possible concerns with not taking it.

Can taking echinacea make it more difficult for me to become pregnant?

There are no studies regarding the effect of echinacea on female fertility. One study found that high concentrations of echinacea added directly to semen decreased sperm movement. Currently it is unknown if use of this agent can result in fertility problems.

Can taking echinacea during my pregnancy cause birth defects?

There is only one published study regarding use of echinacea in pregnancy. Researchers followed 206 women who took echinacea at some point in their pregnancy, 112 of whom took it during the first trimester. No increase in miscarriage or birth defects in offspring was noted. While this information is reassuring, the limited number of cases limits our ability to determine whether there is an increased risk for birth defects or other problems associated with use of echinacea in pregnancy. Consumption of large amounts of the alcohol-containing tincture may result in birth defects or other alcohol-related problems.

Can taking echinacea during my pregnancy cause other kinds of problems?

There are no studies regarding echinacea and pregnancy complications, problems in the newborn period, or the child's behavior or development.

Should I stop taking echinacea during my pregnancy?

In order to receive the most thorough care during pregnancy, you should contact your health care provider before changing or stopping medication use at any time during pregnancy. However, it is clear that more research is needed regarding the impact of echinacea on the fetus. In some situations where a woman is seriously ill, her health care

provider may choose to prescribe a medication that has been better studied in pregnant women.

Can I take echinacea while breastfeeding?

There is no information regarding the transfer of echinacea into human milk or impact of a mother's use of this herbal medication on her breastfed infant. Please contact your health care professional if you wish to breastfeed while taking echinacea.

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*If you have questions about the information on this fact sheet or other exposures during pregnancy, call **OTIS at 1-866-626-6847.***