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## on Drugs and Therapeutics

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# The Medical Letter®

## on Drugs and Therapeutics

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### ▶ Elderberry for Influenza

Patients may ask about taking elderberry for prevention and treatment of influenza. Products containing elderberry are promoted for relief of cold and flu symptoms and as an immune system booster.

**AVAILABILITY** – Elderberry is available commercially in tablets, capsules, syrups, and gummies (*Sambucol*, *Zarbees Naturals*, and others). Fresh or freeze-dried elderberries can be cooked and made into a solution or syrup. All elderberry products available in the US (most contain black elderberry) are considered herbal supplements; they are not FDA-approved for any indication. As with all herbal supplements, the potency and purity of elderberry products is unknown.

**EFFICACY** – No large randomized, controlled trials evaluating the effectiveness of elderberry for prevention or treatment of influenza have been conducted to date. Elderberry appears to have some activity against influenza virus strains *in vitro*.<sup>1-3</sup> In two small studies (conducted outside the US), adults with influenza A or B virus infection taking elderberry extract reported a shorter duration of symptoms compared to those taking placebo.<sup>1,4</sup>

**ADVERSE EFFECTS** – Consuming uncooked blue or black elderberries can cause nausea and vomiting. The rest of the plant (bark, stems, leaves, and root) contains sambunigrin, which can release cyanide.

**PREGNANCY AND LACTATION** – No data are available on the safety of elderberry use during pregnancy or while breastfeeding.<sup>5</sup>

**CONCLUSION** – Prompt treatment with an antiviral drug such as oseltamivir (*Tamiflu*, and generics) has been shown to be effective in large randomized, controlled trials in reducing the duration of influenza symptoms, and it may reduce the risk of influenza-related complications.<sup>6</sup> There is no acceptable evidence to date that elderberry is effective for prevention or treatment of influenza and its safety is unclear. ■

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