

Study shows zinc doesn't help head and neck cancer patients

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Zinc sulfate, a supplement thought to be helpful in regaining the sense of taste for some head and neck cancer patients after radiation therapy, has been found to have no significant impact on preventing or curing taste alteration, according to a study released today in the *International Journal for Radiation Oncology*Biophysics*Physics*, the official journal of ASTRO.

Taste alteration is a common side effect for head and neck cancer patients after radiation therapy. For these patients, usual food flavors taste bland or different, with a few patients losing the sensation of taste altogether. Losing taste sensation can lead to a significant change in eating habits, causing some patient to avoid certain unappealing foods, sometimes leading to additional weight loss at a time when good nutrition is critical.

Previous academic studies have suggested that the use of zinc sulfate could help patients regain their sense of taste more quickly after radiation therapy. Doctors in this phase three, multi-institutional, double-blind, placebo-controlled study found that giving patients a zinc sulfate vitamin supplement had little to no effect on the sense of taste for the patients in the study.

Over the course of three years, 173 patients were treated for head and neck cancer with traditional radiation therapy. Patients were divided into two groups, one group treated with zinc, the other with placebo. Both groups experienced similar degrees of taste alteration, but doctors reported that there was no significant difference in taste recovery between the groups. Only six percent of the zinc-treated group achieved complete taste recovery, compared to 18 percent in the placebo group. This study is the largest ever reported to date to evaluate zinc sulfate in the treatment or prevention of taste alteration for patients receiving radiation therapy for head and neck cancer.

“The results of this study were disappointing in that we hoped that zinc sulfate would help patients maintain their taste based on prior pilot data. However, I am glad that we were able to definitely rule out the use of zinc at this dose level so we can further explore other promising treatments to help patients maintain their quality of life during and after treatment,” said Michele Y. Halyard, M.D., lead author of the study and a radiation oncologist at the Mayo Clinic Scottsdale in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Source: American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology

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