Hitting Herpes Hard

Lystine in supplements and diet can be a helpful tool

January 1, 1997 By Wista Jeanne Johnson

Infection with herpes simplex virus is like having an obnoxious relative come to visit but never leave: You can't get rid of him, so you learn to cope. Oral or topical antiviral drugs, particularly acyclovir (brand name Zovirax), are the standard treatments for herps simplex virus 1 (which causes eruptions on the face and mouth) and 2 (which causes genital sores). Acyclovir is highly effective and only rarely has side effects-but if you lack health insurance, it costs a bundle.

So for some PWAs, alternative remedies may be worth trying. Supplements such as zinc, iron, calcium and vitamins B-12 and C may help resolve deficiencies common in people with herpes, and external vitamin E oil may help soothe the sores. But the nutrient with the best track record remains the amino acid lysine. The few studies conducted on lysine have found it effective in controlling the occurrence, severity and healing time of herpes outbreaks. In two studies, an average dose of 500 milligrams of lysine daily kept herpes in long-term remission; during flare-ups, one to six grams daily (taken between meals) hastened healing.

James Scutero, a PWA living in New York City who developed an Internet newsgroup called misc.health.aids, says, "My face clears up whenever I use a lysine supplement, I can pop up to six grams a day without side effects." (You might experiment to find the most effective dose; studies indicate that at least eight grams daily can be taken safely.) Scutero also applies lysine cream to genital lesions with good results.

Some alternative practitioners maintain the supplement is most effective at treating the early stages of oral, rather than genital, herpes. Others claim it has broader benefits. John Harris, a herbalist and radio health-program producer in New York City, finds that lysine can reduce the frequency of herpes outbreaks among its clients. He also recommends a dietary approach, both for treatment and prevention of future attacks: Eating foods higher in lysine than in arginine, another amino acid. Arginine promotes replication of the herpes simplex virus, while lysine suppresses it-and decreases the body's uptake of arginine.

Lysine-rich foods include fish, chicken, beef, lamb, cheese, beans, brewer's yeast, mung bean sprouts and most fruits and vegetables. Avoid foods high in arginine: Chocolate, in particular, and also nuts and seeds.

But as always with nutrition, there's a twist. Lark Lands, a Georgetown, Colorado-based HIV-nutrition educator and author of *Positively Well*, cautions, "Taking lysine supplements long-term [as a prophylactic] is not advisable, since it might cause an imbalance or deficiency in other amino acids-particularly arginine, which is required for several important functions in the body, including production of growth hormone." Lands does agree with Harris' dietary guidelines, since adequate amounts of arginine can be derived from other foods, and lysine at dietary levels will not block all uptake of arginine.

Any self-medication for serious or persistent conditions should be done in consultation with a qualified health practitioner. Send your home remedies to POZ *Partner, 349 West 12th Street, New York, NY 10014.*

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