

Au zinc

Even when it comes to zinc the bastard element, as Paracelsus called it in the 16th century because he thought it was impure "they order this matter better in France." For there zinc serves as a meeting place, so that lovers and businessmen meet "au zinc," at least during preliminary discussions, because alcohol is a gift of the gods and the counters in the bars are covered with a shiny layer of the metal.

Elsewhere the role of zinc has been more uncertain a therapeutic agent in search of something to cure, potentially important because the body has some 300 zinc-containing enzymes waiting to be energised by a pinch of zinc or a dab of zinc ionic mineral water. Advertised as important for normal functioning of taste, smell, healing, and reproduction, zinc has been promoted as a means of restoring the sense of taste to those who have lost it, and sexual prowess to those who perhaps never had it.

It has also been recommended for acne, alcoholism, Alzheimer's disease, angina, anorexia, anthrax, body odour, bulimia, cavities, Crohn's disease, depression, diabetes, eye disease . . . viral infections, Wilson's disease, and wound healing. Zinc advocates recommend that "your health professional" collect samples of your blood, urine, and hair to measure the zinc content. Zinc has also been claimed to slim the body by decreasing the demand for unnecessary calories that people might otherwise consume.

The latest claim is relief of symptoms of the common cold. Quite large doses have been used, at least six tablets daily, sometimes causing a bad taste, nausea, and mouth irritation, perhaps enough to make sufferers forget about their rhinorrhoea. Rarely, zinc has lowered white cell counts, and there have been three premature births and one stillbirth. Truly blinded studies have been difficult to arrange, the characteristic nasty taste being difficult to reproduce for controls. Results have been conflicting, some negative, others reporting reductions in symptoms and nasal discharge by one or two days. In one study certain cytokine levels were also lowered in a statistically non-significant and clinically uncertain manner. Some people will no doubt want to try taking zinc, but they will need to take a lot of tablets and may experience some side effects. Others may decide that it is not worth the trouble, and that a hefty refreshment "au zinc" may work as well and taste much better.