

AIRBORNE by Ann Gerhardt, MD
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Bottom line at the top: Airborne has an interesting ingredient list, could be toxic if taken as suggested for many days in a row, and may exert a positive placebo effect, if you believe in it.

As cold season persists on into Spring, the makers of Airborne, a compilation of vitamins, minerals, herbs and amino acids, continue to convince consumers that it prevents and cures colds.

This “medical marvel” was developed by a second grade teacher. While she may not be a virus and immunology expert, she seems to be a successful entrepreneur, since in her words Airborne is “one of the fastest selling products in retail history.” At the cheapest price I could find on the internet, 55 cents per tablet, she’s probably doing fairly well.

While stores have trouble keeping up with demand for the stuff, one has to wonder if there is any validity for its claims. No clinical trials of proving its efficacy have been published. The *New York Times* reports that the basis for Airborne’s cold-cure claims came from “a small, company-sponsored clinical trial.” According to *The Times*, “the study has not been published in a medical journal. [The company] would not disclose where the study was done.”

Colds usually last 3-7 days, and resolve on their own, thanks to the amazing human immune system. Most people are happy if a cold goes away within a few days, and it’s quite possible it will without supplements. If you take Airborne and the cold disappears, you never know whether the pill you took shooed the cold away, you believed in the pill so much that it exerted a powerful positive placebo effect, or the cold would have disappeared in the same time by itself.

The teacher also markets Airborne to prevent colds. The directions encourage consumers to take one “before entering crowded environments.” Most of us encounter a lot of crowded environments. If we take a pill and somehow miraculously survive every time without acquiring a cold, we never know whether the pill really

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helped or the person, whose cough spewed germs our way, didn’t aim well enough.

Airborne contains large amounts of vitamin A palmitate (5000Units), vitamin C (1000 mg), vitamin B2 (2.8 mg) and Manganese (3 mg). Used as suggested, up to one every three hours, this could cause liver and skin toxicity, especially in children. Modest amounts of vitamin E (30 IU) and zinc (8 mg), and tiny amounts of magnesium (40mg), selenium (15mcg), glutamine + lysine (50 mg) and potassium (75 mg) add to the length of the ingredient list.

The recommended dose of one immediately before entering a densely populated area or at the first sign of a cold, then every 3 hours as needed, will result in bright yellow urine that might make you think you are getting something good.

According to herbal medicine types, the herbs, Lonicera, forsythia, Schizonepeta, ginger, Isatis root and Echinacea, do have effects that might fight a cold – or at least cold symptoms. The addition that makes less sense, Chinese vitex (also known as chasteberry), reduces fever, but it also “regulates menstrual periods” and contains testosterone and progesterone – not a good thing for women at risk for breast cancer – and may raise blood pressure.

If the herbs do have potential medicinal benefit, the dose is very low, probably not enough to do much good. The maximum dose suggested per day, 8 pills, supplies a total of 2800 mg of all of the herbs combined, just barely approaching the recommended dose of any single one of them. Increasing the dose to therapeutic levels of herbs risks toxicity from vitamin A and the herbs.