Airborne: Does it cure or prevent colds? [1]

Hey Alice!

How's it going? Well, it is the winter season here in New York City and with the bacteria generated in the subways I am in constant fear of catching a cold. Does that stuff Airborne work? I know it was created by a teacher but does that mean it works? Well, I really need this response, it's on sale at the local pharmacy. Thanks!

Much love,
To sneeze or not to sneeze?

Answer

Dear To sneeze or not to sneeze,

That is the question. People in the United States spend billions of dollars a year trying to escape the misery of the common cold. Though some swear by remedies ranging from vitamin C to garlic to physical activity, researchers haven't conclusively found anything that will entirely prevent or cure the common cold. The manufacturers of Airborne claim that the unique combination of herbs, amino acids, antioxidants, and electrolytes "offers vitamin and mineral support for hours," and imply that it helps the body fight bacteria and viruses by boosting the immune system. More recently, however, they've withdrawn their original claims that their product cures or prevents colds.

For context, Airborne reached consumers back in 1999 and quickly became a huge success with endorsements from celebrities and an expanded array of products suitable for children and adults alike. However, after a class-action lawsuit, namely Wilson v. Airborne Health Inc., was filed against Airborne in 2007 and resulted in a $23.5M settlement to refund consumers who purchased the product (if they have proof of purchase) along with Airborne withdrawing the claim that their product could cure the common cold. Despite this result, the company refused any wrongdoing over their advertising. Because Airborne is considered a supplement, it's subject to the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 [2], which says that supplement products can make claims such as “boosts the immune system” or “provides energy” as long as they don't name specific diseases.
It's true that some people may feel that Airborne works for them, but it's tough to say conclusively. Colds can last anywhere from one to ten days and a person's immune system will eventually fight it off, even without vitamins or supplements. There has only been one study on the effectiveness of Airborne. The clinical trial was a double-blind, placebo study, meaning that neither the researchers nor the participants knew who took the real supplement and who took the placebo until after the trial ended. The study found that Airborne outperformed the placebo. However, there were many concerns with the design, implementation, and funding of this study, which created some controversy and put its results into question. In response to critical reviews of the trial from various media outlets, Airborne removed any reference to the study on their packaging stating that the consumers were having trouble understanding the results of a clinical study.

One of the main vitamins in Airborne is vitamin C, which is a commonly touted ingredient to help prevent or cure colds. Despite Airborne products having more than 1000 percent of the recommended dietary allowance of vitamin C, there isn't evidence that it does in fact prevent or cure colds. However, there is research to suggest that consuming vitamin C can help to shorten the length of a cold for some. Where possible, rather than taking vitamin supplements, it's recommended to get vitamin C from foods through a balanced pattern of eating. Excess vitamin C is often excreted from the body, and with too much vitamin C in the body, people may experience some gastrointestinal side effects such as nausea or diarrhea.

There are ways to decrease your chances of catching a cold. You said you lived in New York City. Subways and other enclosed spaces with many people can be germy, especially during the cold season. Medical professionals say your best defense against the common cold is maintaining a healthy lifestyle. That includes eating a balanced diet, being physically active, hydrating (with water), getting plenty of sleep, and for New Yorkers especially, washing your hands. Thorough handwashing [3] with soap and water, particularly before you eat, can keep the subway germs at bay. If the odds aren't in your favor and you end up with a cold, there are many products on the market, as well as natural remedies, that successfully treat the symptoms of the cold: body aches, sore throat, stuffy nose. If you find that your symptoms are particularly severe, you may find it helpful to reach out to a health care provider for more guidance. So, before you go out and buy the newest cold-preventing or a similar supplement, it might be wise to take its claims with a grain of salt (mix with eight ounces of water and gargle!).

Alice!

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Published date:
Apr 28, 2006
Last reviewed on:
Oct 04, 2019

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