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Fear of Flu Sparks Home-Remedy Sales

'Natural' Products Take Advantage of Vaccine Shortage

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People who can't get flu shots have been snapping up all manner of products that they hope will help them avoid getting sick, retailers say.

Sales are up for hand sanitizers and a new variety of antiviral Kleenex tissue. There are herbal concoctions with names like "Airborne" and other products, such as an "air purification" light bulb called the O-Zone Lite, whose makers hope that news about the flu-shot shortage will boost their business.

"When that shortage was announced, we definitely saw a spike" in herbal and homeopathic products, said Judy Strauss Sansone, vice president of health care merchandising for drugstore chain CVS Corp. She wouldn't say how much sales rose after the national shortage of flu shots began in October, but she said the jump was significant.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention caution that natural remedies are no substitutes for a flu shot. "There is no scientific evidence that any herbal, homeopathic, or other folk remedy has any benefit against influenza," said Bonnie Hebert, a CDC spokeswoman.

But people appear to be buying such products, either out of conviction that they work or hope that they might. "If they were relying on the flu vaccine, with this stuff at least they get peace of mind," said James O'Donnell, a pharmacology professor at Rush Medical College in Chicago.

Public health officials have urged people to slow the spread of flu by washing their hands frequently or using a hand sanitizer. Executives at GoJo Industries Inc. in Akron, Ohio, said that has driven up demand for the company's Purell hand-sanitizer lotion, which the company says combines moisturizers and ethyl alcohol to kill germs.

GoJo executives said the biggest increase in sales has come from companies whose flu-shot programs for employees were scrapped because of the vaccine shortage. GoJo has a new product for them: a plastic desktop cradle that can hold a 12-ounce bottle of Purell. It won't be available until next month, but the company is offering retractable clips and lanyards that hold smaller bottles.

The "antiviral" Kleenex, made by Kimberly-Clark Corp., hit stores in August. The middle layer of the three-ply tissue contains citric acid and sodium laurel sulfate, which are designed to kill cold and flu virus strains on contact when a tissue user blows or wipes his nose.

In October, Kimberly-Clark launched a \$30 million advertising campaign, blanketing TV, magazines, radio and the Internet with ads promising the tissue will trap and kill germs. Mary Goggans, a marketing director for Kleenex, said the ad campaign was planned before the flu-vaccine shortage.

"We got a much better sense of awareness for the product without changing a thing," she said. "Right time, right place."

Goggans said "demand is exceeding our original forecast," but would not provide sales figures.

Since the flu-shot shortage began, sales in the herbal and homeopathic category on the Drugstore.com Inc. Web site have shot up, the company said. "The greatest growth by far is in the resistance items" aimed at colds and flu, said Sandee Escene, a senior category manager.

Escene said sales of Airborne have been particularly strong, up 300 percent over a year ago.

Airborne began as a home project by Virginia Knight-McDowell, a California second-grade teacher who was fed up with catching colds from students. Over the years, she experimented with vitamins and herbal substances until she discovered a blend that she says prevented her from getting sick. The \$167,000 used to launch the product came from a script her husband, Rider McDowell, wrote for a Christmas movie, "The Angel of Pennsylvania Avenue."

Marketing for the product, which is dissolved like Alka-Seltzer in a glass of water and sells for about \$7 a package, notes that crowded places "are spawning grounds for germs that cause cold and sickness." The manufacturer doesn't make any claims about what Airborne does, and the product's packaging makes no mention of the flu. Instead, consumers are instructed to take it "at the first sign of a cold symptom or before entering crowded environments, like airplanes, offices and schools."

Last year, the company said, Airborne recorded \$21.4 million in sales. Rider McDowell said he had expected sales to double this year. Then on Sept. 30, his wife appeared on Oprah Winfrey's television show. Winfrey said she had stocked up on Airborne's five flavors. Nine days later, the flu-shot crisis began. So did an Airborne bonanza.

"It looks like we're going to quadruple last year's sales, maybe even more," Rider McDowell said. The company was two weeks behind on orders to several drugstore chains even after adding production shifts, he said.

Herbal remedies such as Airborne, made from dried plants, aren't subject to regulation by the Food and Drug Administration as long as they don't make claims of specific health benefits. Homeopathic remedies, made from diluted natural substances, date to the 1700s, and come under limited FDA regulations. They can claim some specific health effects.

A few months before the flu vaccine shortage, Hyland's Inc., a privately held company based in Los Angeles and St. Louis, introduced a product, Complete Flu Care. The tablets, which retail for about \$8 or \$9 for a package of 120, are dissolved under the tongue and contain six substances from flowers and plants. Hyland's says, "Individuals who take the medicine when they start to feel sick will benefit from a shorter flu episode."

John P. Borneman, chief executive of Hyland's, said "the lid just blew off" when the vaccine shortage began. To meet demand, Borneman said he has had to run his plants seven days a week, add a third production shift and pay his employees overtime to work extra shifts. He said he expected to sell 1 million units by the middle of this month to retailers such as Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and CVS. That's 10 times what the company sold in flu products last year.

Analysts say the spike in demand for such alternative flu therapies reflects broader health care trends. Consumers are increasingly "self-medicating," seeking their own remedies to avoid long waits at doctors' offices and high co-payments for office visits and prescription drugs.

People seeking a talisman against the flu also can surf the Web for products like the O-Zone Lite, a 23-watt light bulb coated with titanium dioxide that supposedly kills viruses, bacteria, fungi and mold. "It's not just a light bulb. It's an air purification system," company chief executive David deMartino said. The bulbs sell for \$39.95 each.

So far there hasn't been a flu epidemic, but the flu season often doesn't peak until February or March. If the flu does arrive in full force, sufferers will find new twists in products from the mainstream pharmaceutical industry.

Shortly after the vaccine shortage was announced, Roche Laboratories Inc. retooled its marketing strategy for Tamiflu, a prescription antiviral flu treatment. Previously, the medicine was marketed as effective in reducing the flu's effects if taken in the two days after symptoms appear.

Now, the manufacturer is reminding doctors that the drug can prevent infection when taken shortly after the user is exposed to someone else who has the flu. "Until the flu really hits, we're focusing our message on prevention," said Terence Hurley, a spokesman for Roche. Hurley said prescriptions for Tamiflu are at their highest level since the drug went on sale in 1999.

Traditional over-the-counter products to treat cold, flu and allergy symptoms have had flat sales in recent years. U.S. sales this year are expected to match last year's \$2.8 billion, according to Mintel International Group, a market research firm.

Analysts say industry growth is usually driven by innovative ways to deliver familiar remedies.

This season, Novartis AG introduced Theraflu Thin Strips, a cough suppressant that dissolves on the tongue. Pfizer Inc. sells SudaCare Nighttime Vapor-Plug, a waterless vaporizer that plugs into an electrical outlet and emits menthol and eucalyptus vapors to relieve congestion.

And McNeil Consumer & Specialty Pharmaceuticals is ready for the flu season with Children's Tylenol Meltaways in three flavors: Bubblegum Burst, Grape Punch and Wacky Watermelon.