

Kids And Health: Let's separate the child-health facts from fiction

By DR.ROBERT NOHLE, SPECIAL TO THE P-I, 6/3/08

Day-in and day-out parents ask me about certain health conditions or treatments that have no basis in fact. Those guys on "Mythbusters" have made a career of separating the truth from urban legend -- though it often involves explosions, fire or fast cars. Busting long-held myths of child health is perhaps not as exciting to watch but is still important. Here are a few of the most common child-health myths.

- **Antibiotics should be used to treat the flu or colds, especially if your child has green mucus.**

MYTH! Common colds and stomach flu are caused by viruses. Antibiotics are used in treating bacteria; viruses do not change into bacteria. Green mucus does not mean your child needs antibiotics either, the change from clear to green is often just a normal process the body goes through as it recovers from upper respiratory illness. Antibiotics won't help your child recover any faster -- most colds last 7 to 10 days before symptoms fade. The problem of taking an antibiotic when it isn't needed is that overuse can create resistance to bacteria, making it more difficult to treat any serious bacterial infections in the future.

- **Eating too much sugar can cause diabetes.**

MYTH! Diabetes is caused by a combination of genetics and lifestyle. Eating a diet full of sugary food is definitely not good for you but does not "bring on" diabetes. Being overweight can increase the risk of type-2 diabetes (formerly called "adult onset" diabetes but now a threat to overweight people of all ages, including children). If diabetes runs in the family, you will want to ensure that everyone eats a healthy, well-balanced diet and gets regular exercise.

- **Going out in the cold without a coat/hat/mittens will cause a cold.**

MYTH! As we mentioned before, colds are caused by viruses. This usually means that your child has some kind of direct or indirect contact with someone who is sick. Colds are more frequent in the fall and winter, not because of the weather, but primarily due to the fact we are indoors more and therefore have a higher exposure to viruses. It is true, however, that a number of factors (such as stress, fatigue or poor nutrition) can increase susceptibility. Ultimately, playing outside without a coat or with wet hair won't give a child a cold -- though they might feel cold!

- **Candy will make your child hyper.**

MYTH! You can't blame the chocolate, ice cream, candy or other sweet treats for your child "bouncing off the walls." Though you can perhaps blame the environment in which the treat is served -- such as a birthday party or other celebration. Study after study (particularly a landmark study conducted by the FDA) finds no relationship between sugar intake and hyperactivity. Cutting out sugar is always a good idea, but don't expect it to change your child's behavior.

- **Slouching causes scoliosis.**

MYTH! Scoliosis (or curvature of the spine) affects an estimated 2 to 3 percent of children under age 16 -- more commonly in girls. For a great percentage of the cases, there is no identifiable cause. Though we do know that sitting up straight won't prevent scoliosis. You can provide better protection by ensuring your child gets regular screenings and adequate calcium/Vitamin D.

There are many more myths out there so we'll be sure to revisit this topic from time to time. If you ever have a question about a treatment or condition, you should not be hesitant to ask your child's pediatrician. Some of these myths have been passed down many generations so you can bet we have heard it before -- and we are sure to hear it again! We are happy to help you sort the fact from fiction.

Dr. Robert Nohle is chief of pediatrics for Seattle-based Group Health Cooperative.