

The Hygiene Hypothesis

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By Dr. Derek Conte

Babies are born with relatively undeveloped immune systems. In fact, they have to “borrow” some immune cells from their mothers when they first come into the world. Then, their own immune systems must “learn” and get stronger by being exposed to germs in their environment, giving them resistance to the broad spectrum of pathogens in our environment. This is the way of Nature. Still, there have been scourges throughout history that have claimed millions of lives like the 1917 Spanish flu epidemic. But with the development of vaccines and a greatly heightened sense of public and personal hygiene, fearsome diseases have been contained or wiped out.

Even so, it is apparent that there is a dramatic increase in the allergy and asthma rates in Western nations, which boast the best access to medical care, vaccines and the cleanest environments, while less-developed countries are not showing these increases. Is it possible we are too clean? This observation was the impetus for the “Hygiene Hypothesis”, given strength by scientist, David P. Strachan, in the British Medical Journal in 1989. The theory is that, “lack of (natural) early childhood exposure to infectious agents and parasites increases susceptibility to allergic diseases by suppressing the natural development of the immune system”, (Wikipedia). This hypothesis is now being extended to the possible causes of autism as well (Elsevierhealth.com, “Autism, asthma, inflammation, and the hygiene hypothesis”, by Becker, 2007).

In the first half of the 20th century, poliomyelitis was as feared as AIDS was in the 1980's. The explanation for the dramatic rise in polio was the lack of childhood exposure to the polio germs that had been in the environment before the modern era, which brought improvements in waste disposal, water quality and indoor plumbing. While these measures protected the public from cholera, people could build no resistance to the polio germ because it was swept away, (Columbia.edu).

On the vaccine front (Immunology Today, March 1998, “Give us this day our daily germs” by Rook and Stanford), scientists are confronting the fact that many inoculations are stimulating very narrow rather than broad spectrum immunity, depriving the immune system of its natural, healthy development and “learning”, predisposing people to hypersensitivity disorders because of the immunological imbalances created by the vaccines themselves. They conclude: “...it may be prudent to start ensuring that vaccines do not merely protect from infections, but actually replace them as immunological stimuli”.

There is strong debate about these ideas not only among chiropractors, but especially among the scientific and medical professions. So, what to do? We can't go backwards and dirty the water or get rid of our plumbing, but perhaps we can understand that our bodies are designed to learn and to cope with most of what the environment throws at

us. If and when it is too much for us there is medical help to be had. So, maybe it wouldn't be bad for the children to get a little dirty, after all.

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