

Antibiotics could weaken baby's immunity

A Canadian study, published in the June issue of *Chest*, found that the use of antibiotics in the first year of life destroys the disease-causing microbes that help develop the immune system, making infants vulnerable to asthma and other diseases. The study recommends the use of mild antibiotic drugs in case of infection.



How to protect your feet

Dr Nina Madnani

During the monsoons your feet are the most abused part of your body. Here's what you can do to protect them from infection:

- 1 Look for symptoms:** Don't ignore the itch between your toes and the pain in your feet. In diabetics and the elderly especially, cellulitis — painful swelling of the leg — requires immediate attention. If you have a reddish and scaly rash, whitish sticky skin between toes, small ulcers or a painful and swollen foot, consult your doctor immediately.
- 2 Wear proper footwear:** Wet footwear can lead to a softening of the skin and cause cuts, shoe bites and infections. Avoid canvas or cloth shoes which could get soaked; dry wet shoes before wearing them again. You could also carry an extra pair of socks and shoes.
- 3 Clean your feet:** Since it is difficult to avoid dirty water, wash and examine your feet at the end of the day. Apply antiseptic cream on any cut or wound every day. Diabetics must watch their diet and keep their sugar levels in control.
- 4 Keep feet dry:** The skin protects you from infections as long it is kept dry. Once your skin is wet, the outer layer softens and gets damaged easily. You can use a hair dryer to keep your feet dry, especially between the toes.
- 5 Seek treatment:** A bacterial or fungal infection can be treated with an appropriate cream as recommended by your doctor. In case of fungal infection, use a Gention violet lotion with one per cent concentration after consulting a doctor.

Dr Madnani is a dermatologist. She spoke to Swati Pujari

The bubble has burst

As urban lifestyles undergo a sea change, we are no longer as protected as before. Our immune system is under severe strain, and more people are falling sick with a variety of illnesses. Labonita Ghosh reports



Here's a health alert for Mumbaiers. Diabetes, known to affect only the middle-aged, is now hitting 30-year-olds. Hypertension, acidity and ulcers now strikes 25-year-olds. Poor man's diseases like tuberculosis and skin ailments like psoriasis, known to breed in unhygienic and malnourished conditions, are now common among the well-off. Doctors at Delhi's National Institute of Immunology say that in the last five years, there has been a 10 per cent rise in the incidence of coughs, viral fever and influenza in the country.

These seemingly unrelated facts have one common thread: they are all the result of a new scourge, a battered immune system. "Our immune systems have been thrown out of gear," says physician Dr Zubin Vaid. "Either our immunity is poorer, making us vulnerable to a host of bacterial and viral infections, or our immune system is forced to work overtime against external allergens."

Immunity refers to the body's natural defence against illnesses in the form of antibodies produced in the blood to fight off millions of bacteria, microbes, viruses and parasites. The body's resistance is lowered when these antibodies are not produced properly. Another factor governing immunity is pH or potential hydrogen, the number of hydrogen ions or the acidity levels, of the body, says natural health counselor Pramod Vora. The pH of a healthy body is slightly alkaline; when it becomes more acidic, it creates a breeding ground for germs. "Immunity is compromised when this pH is allowed to drift to acidic levels," adds Vora.

This happens for a number of reasons. Bronchoskopist Dr Salil Bendre says changes in lifestyle — stress, long and irregular work hours, lack of exercise and sleep, tobacco and alcohol — all contribute to a weakened immune system. Poor eating habits, with people skipping meals because they have no time, or living on processed and junk food, are next. "Today 70 out of 100 patients complain of irritable bowel syndrome, which was not so common before," says Dr Bendre. "People's stomachs and immunity levels are taking a hit. Their diet is deprived of the hundreds of micronutrients the body needs and no amount of supplements can compensate."

Even forgetting to drink water, as Vijay Dholakia found out aggravates the problem. The 33-year-old banker works long hours, grabs a quick bite at his desk and used to forget to drink water. Till he started getting headaches and nausea every evening. "I realised that whenever I was unwell, it was only because I needed water," says Dholakia. Substituting water with colas can also weaken the immune system. Aerated drinks have a highly acidic pH of approximately 5.0, says Vora, so overexposure has driven the pH in youngsters' bodies to acidic levels and compromised their immunity.

Factors like pollution and vehicle emissions are common to every metro, but Mumbaiers are particularly vulnerable to bronchial and respiratory tract ailments because of this. "Overcrowding and train travel is like slow poison," says Dr Neeraj Goel, head of CMPH Medical College. This is certainly true for 30-something Vinay Pandya, who moved here from his hometown in Uttar Pradesh two years ago. He suffers at least two asthmatic attacks every month

now, as opposed to a handful for most of his life back home. "I try to use a face mask or a handkerchief, but it doesn't work," says Pandya.

Adds professor Avadhesh Surolia, head of National Institute of Immunology: "A change in the environment has led to a dramatic increase in asthma and breathing disorders. It's clearly a combination of pollutants and lowered immunity." Over time, says Dr Vaid, these can intensify into irreversible lung disorders like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which affects breathing and the airways.

College student Rohit Kalsekar, 15, has a persistent lower respiratory tract infection (LRTI) — manifest in continuous bouts of coughing and mucous secretion — from taking a bus to his college in Malad from his Andheri home every day. He suffers bronchial infections several times a month, and has tried everything, from antibiotics to homeopathy and ayurveda. "I find I'm much better during vacations, when I stay home," he says. In a bizarre twist, the youngster's pill-popping could further damage his immune system. "The very drugs we take to treat simple things like colds and sore throats have, in fact, led to lowered immunity," says Vora. "This in turn, can make one catch repeated and more frequent infections."

The solution to this problem, like others, is to eat and live healthy. In short, take care of your immune system because it's a lifetime's fortification against diseases. "There seems to be a correlation between a healthy mind and the immune system," says Surolia. "When stress and other factors impinge on our happiness, they weaken our immunity." That's certainly a clear warning.

Home remedies for low immunity

Almonds: Eat a handful of almonds for your daily dose of vitamin E. Studies have found that vitamin E deficiency causes problems in the integrity of the immune system.

Crab: Zinc acts as a catalyst in the immune system's killer response to foreign bodies, and protects the body from invading cells. Three ounces of fresh or canned crab will give you one-third of your recommended daily allowance.

Guava: This tasty fruit gives you more than twice your daily vitamin C needs. Vitamin C acts as an immune enhancer by helping white blood cells perform at their peak.

Chicken: Selenium is a trace mineral vital to the development and movement of white blood cells. A 3-ounce piece of chicken gives you almost half your daily needs.

Wine: Have a glass of red wine and you may help your body take out a few harmful foreign bodies. Certain components in wine seem to help in killing infectious bacteria, such as salmonella. Don't drink too much; a glass a day should do fine.

Yogurt: Yogurt seems to strengthen white blood cells and helps produce antibodies. One study found that people who ate 6 ounces of yogurt a day avoided colds, hay fever and diarrhoea.

Garlic: Garlic is well-known for its antibacterial and antiviral properties. It's even been thought to help prevent cancer.

Source: howstuffworks.com

Dreams get sexy

A survey by the University of Montreal in Canada reports that eight per cent of dreams swirl around sexual situations. While women reported as many sex dreams as men, a whopping 18 per cent of sex dreams in women involved unwanted sex; the number was five per cent in men. Feeding the stereotype that many men think only of themselves, none of the men's dreams featured their partner having an orgasm; four per cent of women's dreams did.

Over-the-counter drugs not always a safe bet

The hazard often lies with consuming multiple products and excessive use

EJ Mundell

The bizarre death of Arielle Newman, 17, a New York City high school cross-country runner, from an overdose of muscle-pain cream in April this year has raised a red flag again on the hazards of overusing common over-the-counter (OTC) medications.

According to the New York City medical examiner's office, Newman died from an accidental overdose of methyl salicylate, the ingredient found in popular sports balms. To help ease exercise-related discomfort, the teenager reportedly had been putting Bengay on her legs between running meets, while also using adhesive pads with methyl salicylate — an aspirin-like anti-inflammatory.

"There were multiple products, used to great excess," Ellen Borakove, a spokeswoman for the NYC medical examiner's office said. All of the products can be found as nonprescription items on drug store shelves.

Methyl salicylate, or salicylic acid, is the active ingredient in creams such as Bengay, Icy

Hot and Tiger Balm, as well as aspirin, and "is potentially harmful if it is overused," says Dr Gerard Varlotta, director of sport rehabilitation at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine in New York City.

An anti-clotting agent, salicylic acid at very high doses "can cause internal bleeding, it can cause arrhythmias — longer state of muscle contractions — of the heart and problems in the liver among other serious complications," he says. However, he adds, long-familiar brands like Bengay don't set off alarm bells, so the temptation to overuse them is prevalent.

While most people would definitely think twice about swallowing a fistful of aspirin or other OTC pills, people forget that creams carry dangers, too. As with any drug, moderation is the key. "You have to follow the directions, because the poison is in the dose," advises Elena Juris, an education outreach specialist at the American Association of Poison Control Centers in Washington DC. And that maxim, she adds, applies to creams just as much as it does to pills.

Newman's Bengay-linked death was an extremely rare occurrence, however, and Johnson & Johnson, which makes the cream, says that their product "is safe and effective when used as directed."

Apart from the advice given for prescrip-



When medicine becomes bad: Follow directions carefully because the poison is in the dose — nvt

tion drugs, consumers have to read label instructions carefully and warnings for all OTC products. However, Varlotta believes that the cautions could be better highlighted. "If you look at all of these OTC products, you cannot tell anything from the outside of the box," he says. In the case of the Bengay that Newman used, "there's nothing in big letters that says that it contains aspirin. It's in the fine print."

Many consumers also fail to realise that the same drug can pop up in multiple, and very different, OTC products. "Cough and cold preparations are a common mistake," Juris says. "It's not just looking for directions; it's also making sure you are not combining products and increasing the recommended dosage."

Other OTC products on Varlotta's radar include the painkillers Advil or Motrin, a host of poorly regulated herbals and dietary supplements, and Voltaren, an anti-inflammatory muscle cream that many of his patients bring back with them from Europe.

The bottom line, say the experts, is that every drug — even a nonprescription cream — comes with some risk. "Just because it's OTC doesn't mean that it's entirely safe and that it can be used against the directions that are being set out by the makers," Varlotta says. "People should know what they are taking, both orally and on their skin." — HealthDay News