

HEALTH BRIEFS

THOUSANDS DIE UNAWARE OF LIFE-SAVING VACCINE

HOUSTON — Thousands of lives are being lost every year because people are unaware of a readily available vaccine. It is the vaccine for pneumococcal pneumonia, an illness that affects mostly adults older than 65 but also very young children and people with certain chronic illnesses. "Many people do not get inoculated because they are unaware of the vaccine, and they are not pressured by their physicians to take it," said Dr. Daniel M. Musher, an infectious-diseases expert at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "Research has shown that people are more likely to get inoculated if their doctors recommend it." The vaccine is also important for people with lung disease, heart disease and immune-system disorders, including HIV. "People who have had their spleens removed are especially susceptible to pneumococcal infection and must be vaccinated," Musher said. The spleen helps clear bacteria from the blood, and its absence leaves a person prey to pneumonia infections.

DOCTORS SAY FEWER PARENTS CHOOSING CIRCUMCISION

HOUSTON — Many parents of newborn sons are now choosing not to have them circumcised. "For Jewish and Muslim parents, circumcision is a religious choice and clearly a separate issue," said Dr. Mary L. Brandt, a pediatric surgeon at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "But for most other cases it is a matter of choice, and many of my patients' parents are declining the procedure." Brandt cites two reasons for not choosing circumcision: There is no data to suggest a true medical advantage to the surgical removal of foreskin. And as with any surgical procedure, there is a risk of complications and infection, even though they are very minor. There are occasional cases when circumcision is a necessity, such as phimosis (scarring that prohibits foreskin retraction), paraphimosis (when the foreskin cannot be returned to its normal position), or balanitis (infection of the foreskin).

SUMMER MEDICAL PROGRAM SEEKS TO EDUCATE UNDERGRADS

HOUSTON — College students interested in medical careers may apply for the Honors Premedical Academy, a six-week summer program at Baylor College of Medicine and Rice University, both in Houston. The program, funded in part by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, aims to make the participants more competitive in the medical-school applicants' pool. Students earn nine undergraduate credit hours. They are paired with Baylor physicians in the mornings and take afternoon science and communications classes at Rice. Tuition and housing are free. Applicants must have completed one year of college biology. They must have at least a 3.0 overall grade-point average and a 2.75 GPA in the sciences. Additional information is available by calling 1-800-798-8244. The application deadline is April 1.

HEALTH CHANNEL REACHES RURAL, URBAN PHYSICIANS

HOUSTON — Patients in small communities and large urban areas will benefit from a new service being offered to physicians across the country. The Health Channel, a satellite-based program that provides continuing medical education for physicians and other health-care professionals, supplies cutting-edge medical information through daily programming. Previously, health-care professionals relied on periodic conferences and journals for learning about new techniques in medicine. "The Health Channel removes the barriers often faced by doctors, nurses and other health professionals who must balance patient care with the need to continually learn about the latest trends in health care," said Kevin Fitzpatrick, who heads the program developed by Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

CRANBERRY JUICE NO USE FOR URINARY INFECTIONS

HOUSTON — If you're female and have a urinary infection, drinking cranberry juice probably is not going to help. Contrary to widely held belief, there is no objective proof that cranberry juice can cure a urinary infection, said Dr. Michael Coburn of Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. For recurring infections, antibiotics are a common treatment. This can be particularly helpful for women who are biologically predisposed to frequent urinary infections, said Coburn, a urologist. If you are postmenopausal, estrogen supplements can help. Infections can be prevented by good hygiene and drinking plenty of water. Coburn cautions, however, that drinking water will not, as some people believe, "flush out" an already established infection.

HEALTH

How to give yourself self-confidence

By Charles W. Faulkner
Special to Sentinel-Voice

From the shy little sixth-grader to the seemingly I-have-it-all-together business, self-confidence is an issue we all struggle with. Here are some tips to begin building a positive image of yourself:

• **Do not be intimidated.** Many people get a psychological boost from frightening you. If someone is walking down the sidewalk directly in front of you, and toward you, move over and let them pass. If they think that this is a "big victory" for them, that's their problem.

They have actually displayed their feelings of inadequacy. Do not let them intimidate you.

• **Try to get used to things that cause you anxiety.** You fear things that make you nervous only because you haven't conquered them.

Maybe you haven't even tried them. Eliminate anxiety and fear by trying new things. If you try something new and it doesn't work for you, try it again and again until it works. Eventually you will succeed.

• **Deal with people "where they are."** No one is totally compatible with everyone, but we all have at least one thing in common with all people. It is not necessary to get along with everyone (sometimes it's not worth the trouble), but it's fun, and it's a challenge. Relationship-

building is part of public relations, so look at meeting people as a way to sell yourself.

You like to paint. Your friend Mary does, too. You also like to ride a bicycle, but she doesn't? What should you do? Have a painting session with Mary or take her to an art gallery. But, also go cycling with her and do other things that peak her interest.

When you press your friends to do the things they enjoy, rather than things they are unfamiliar with and could cause stress, you cement friendships.

Questions or comments can be directed to Dr. Faulkner. Please write him at 5722 Greene Street, # 302, Philadelphia, PA 19144.

Breast-feeding benefits extend beyond the baby

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON — Mothers who breast-feed are not only making life better for their infants, but are also paving the way for a healthier life for themselves.

"Studies have shown women who breast-feed have a reduced risk of contracting pre-menopausal breast cancer," said Dr. Judy Hopkinson at the USDA/ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "A woman's risk of bone fractures from osteoporosis later in life may also be reduced."

Mothers who breast-feed also benefit from hormones released during breast-feeding.

"One of these hormones, oxytocin, helps a mother's uterus return to its pre-pregnancy state more quickly," said Hopkinson, a Baylor assistant professor of pediatrics.

"Hormones also help mothers to relax and focus on their infants. Many women who breast-feed report feeling a special closeness with their babies."

While mothers benefit in many ways from breast-feeding, infants are the biggest

beneficiaries.

"Breast-fed babies are less likely to develop allergies or serious illness, such as diarrhea, and bacterial meningitis, and one-third less likely to be re-admitted to the hospital in the first year of life," said Hopkinson.

"Other studies suggest breast-feeding may prevent a child from contracting diseases such as diabetes, and lymphoma."

Recent studies have also found parents of babies who are breast-fed spend fewer dollars on medical care.

In addition, breast-fed

infants may be more intelligent than formula-fed infants. New evidence suggests that breast-fed infants have higher IQ's, and perform better in school than formula-fed infants, despite socio-economic differences.

"Mothers who breast-feed are providing their infants with the best possible nutrition," Hopkinson said. "They are also protecting them from disease and maximizing the chance for optimal neurological development, reducing their health care costs, and improving the mother's long-term health outlook."

Weight training in youth requires special precautions

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Strength training offers benefits for many people, but consider a few facts before you encourage your child or young teenager to head for the weight room, says the head of Stanford University's sports medicine program.

Before puberty, weight training is not likely to provide significant increases in strength. And up to two years after puberty, kids are at increased risk for injury if they lift weights improperly, says Dr. Gordon Matheson, associate professor and chief of the Division of Sports Medicine.

"I would not prescribe a weight program for a preadolescent, aside from a general strength and conditioning program not specifically designed to increase bulk. Without the increased hormone levels (e.g. testosterone) that occur at puberty, the strength benefits are marginal at best in both boys and girls. Kids who want to improve their athletic ability are better off developing skills by practicing and playing their sports," Matheson says.

"However, if your preteen is enthusiastic and wants to become active in weight training for its own sake, it can be safe as a sport if the child is training and appropriately

supervised. In this age group, machine weights are safer than the freeweights, or barbells, because they are enclosed and designed not to fall or drop on the user," he adds.

After puberty, boys gain strength and increased bulk from hormonal changes, and lifting weights can enhance these natural changes, Matheson says. But until 18 months to two years after the onset of adolescence, "kids are at increased risk of injuring tendons at the point where the still-developing growth plate attaches to the tendons," he says.

"The skeleton matures about 18 months before the muscles and tendons do, so during that period, the tendons and muscles are vulnerable to injury at the points where they attach to the skeleton," Matheson explains. Sports activities of all kinds, not just weight training, can cause injuries in young adolescents, so caution and a prudent, supervised stretching and training regimen are important,

he says.

While boys are more vulnerable to injury than girls during this time because of male hormone production, the same general precautions apply to girls, who will gain strength — but not significant bulk — from weight training after puberty. "Girls can benefit to

some extent from weight training, particularly if they are engaging in sports such as basketball, wrestling or even soccer," Matheson says.

"But have your teen observe extra caution during the first two years of adolescence, when tendons and muscles are especially damage-prone."

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