

HEALTH BRIEFS

CHILDREN NEED TO LEARN HOW TO HIT THE BOOKS AT HOME

HOUSTON — Getting children into a good homework routine during their early years can lay the foundation for a lifetime of good study habits. "Parents can teach their children good homework habits by example," said Dr. Florence Eddins, a child psychiatrist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. Parents should sit near the child and do some work of their own. This will give the child an idea of how to do homework. Flexibility is important. Some children may like to do homework with music in the background or may need to play before sitting down to hit the books. It is good to experiment for a while and see what works best for the child. Homework success also depends on good communication between parent and teacher. Learning what the teacher expects from the child will make it easier for the parents to help with homework.

AN ULTRASOUND TEST MIGHT PREVENT PREMATURE DELIVERY

HOUSTON — An ultrasound test might help physicians prevent premature delivery, the leading cause of disability and death for babies. The cervical ultrasound exam can detect early changes in dilation of the cervix, the narrow, lower portion of the uterus. Normally, the cervix does not widen until the end of pregnancy, when contractions of the uterus begin and the baby is ready to be born. "If the ultrasound test reveals early shortening of the cervix, physicians can take steps to prevent premature delivery," said Dr. Isabelle Wilkins, a Baylor associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology. The test uses an ultrasound probe that sends out sound waves, enabling physicians to measure the entire length of the cervix, a view not available from ultrasound tests. The physician can try to delay preterm delivery by placing a stitch in the cervix for extra support.

HYPERACTIVITY DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN ADHD

HOUSTON — Inattentive and hyperactive children do not necessarily have attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). ADHD, characterized by a short-attention span, distraction, impulsiveness, aggressiveness, and constant attention-getting behavior, is a biological disorder present at birth. Symptoms must be present by age 7 for classification as ADHD. "Clinical experience and testing help us determine whether the symptoms and behaviors are abnormal for a child's age and developmental stage," said Dr. Diane Treadwell-Deering, a child psychiatrist at Baylor College of Medicine and a specialist at Texas Children's Hospital's Learning Support Center. Doctors obtain information about the child's habits and lifestyle from teachers, parents and other adults. Specific tests determine attention span, impulsiveness, and how a child approaches academic tasks. Once an ADHD diagnosis is confirmed, doctors can then prescribe the appropriate medications.

SURGERY EASES SEVERE MUSCLE SPASMS OF DYSTONIA

HOUSTON — Pallidotomy, a brain surgery that controls the movement disorders of Parkinson's disease, is now easing the disabling involuntary muscle spasms of dystonia. Dystonia, a muscle disorder causing muscle contractions, can be "focal," striking muscles in the neck, eyelids, mouth and jaw, vocal chords or limbs, or "generalized," meaning it affects the whole body. "Patients with generalized dystonia are often confined to a wheelchair or bed because the severe muscle contractions make it hard to sit normally or walk upright," said Dr. Joseph Jankovic, director of the Parkinson's Disease Center and Movement Disorders Clinic at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. Pallidotomy surgery targets the globus pallidus, an area deep in the brain that is involved in controlling movement. In dystonia patients the nerve cells in this area are overactive. Doctors pass an electrical current through a probe placed in the calculated area and destroy a small number of the overactive cells. Destroying the cells stops the muscle spasms. Most patients improve drastically over a period of weeks.

PARENTS SHOULD PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO INFANTS' CHRONIC COUGH

HOUSTON — Chronic coughs in infants can be caused by a number of different things. "The most likely cause of cough for children up to 18 months is gastroesophageal reflux, aortic arch anomalies, or cough variant asthma," said Dr. Stuart Abramson, an assistant professor of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine and physician at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston. Gastroesophageal reflux often results in vomiting. Treatment includes keeping infants in an elevated position, using cereal to thicken formula, and medicine that control the regurgitation of stomach contents.

Alzheimer's is on the rise in women

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Forgetting where you left your car keys is one thing, forgetting your child's name is another.

For the millions of Americans with Alzheimer's disease, confusion and memory loss are all too real. Unfortunately, this devastating disease is increasing at an alarming rate - particularly in women.

Alzheimer's disease currently affects four million Americans and is one of the most common chronic diseases of older people.

Since the risk of Alzheimer's disease increases dramatically with advancing age, women - who have a longer life expectancy than men - are disproportionately affected.

Currently, women comprise 72 percent of the U.S. population age 85 and older, and nearly one-half of this group has Alzheimer's disease.

But experts predict that the number of Americans with Alzheimer's disease will more than double by the year 2050 to 14 million - most of whom will be women.

To help women better understand Alzheimer's disease and its implications,

the Alzheimer's Association is encouraging women to learn more about the disease through an awareness initiative that was recently launched.

As part of the campaign, the association has developed a brochure titled Women and Alzheimer's Disease, which provides women with valuable information including the warning signs of the disease, treatment options and caregiver tips.

"Alzheimer's disease is an extremely important women's health issue," says Steven DeKosky, MD, director of the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center at the University of Pittsburgh, and chair of the Alzheimer's Association's Medical and Scientific Advisory Council.

"It currently affects women more often than men, and with the aging of the Baby Boomer generation, the number of women with Alzheimer's disease will increase dramatically."

Not only do more women suffer from Alzheimer's disease, they also provide the majority of care for individuals with the disease.

Eighty percent of caregivers are women - usually the wife, daughter or daughter-in-law of



the person with Alzheimer's disease.

Experts agree these women often are under significant stress and need to take special care of their health too.

"Alzheimer's disease puts incredible demands and stress on the caregiver," says Teresa Radebaugh, Sc.D., deputy director of the Alzheimer's Association Ronald & Nancy Regan Research Institute, established in 1995 to help advance Alzheimer research. "In fact, the Alzheimer caregiver is often called the hidden, or second victim, of the disease."

"This education initiative, featuring the brochure, national advertising campaign, and

other efforts, is important," says Thomas Kirk, vice president of patient, family and education services at the Alzheimer's Association.

"As a leader in information and assistance for people with Alzheimer's disease, their families and caregivers, we are committed to providing current and relevant information for people who need it. We encourage all women to take the time to learn more about Alzheimer's disease."

For a free copy of the brochure, as well as additional information about Alzheimer's disease, call the Alzheimer's Association at 1-800-272-3900 or visit its website at www.alz.org.

Staying power puts fun back into fitness

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Poor endurance can take all the fun out of physical activity for many children.

Children who are generally inactive can tire quickly when exercising. "Providing children don't have asthma or other medical conditions, tiring quickly means they're probably working too hard for their level of fitness," said Dr. Marta Fiorotto, a scientist at the USDA/ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine.

Fiorotto believes that overexertion can trigger a negative cycle. "Children who tire easily may not develop skills and poor skills increase frustration and lead to discouragement. Discouraged children usually quit trying," said Fiorotto, an assistant professor of pediatrics.

Children can be helped to reverse this cycle. The key is improving endurance.

"Children can be taught to pace themselves," Fiorotto said. "They should be able to talk while exercising. If they're too breathless to talk, they should slow down. If they can sing, they're not working hard enough," she said.

Keeping the right pace permits sufficient oxygen to reach muscle cells to burn body

fat as fuel. "Most children have enough body fat to fuel prolonged periods of physical activity," she said. "But if they surpass their level of fitness and their muscles can't get oxygen fast enough, the body compensates by burning more of its supply of glycogen, a form of carbohydrate stored in muscle tissue." Prolonging glycogen is key to delaying tiredness.

"Children who don't tire quickly tend to exercise more, which leads to improved cardiovascular fitness and even greater endurance," Fiorotto

said.

There is little doubt that regular physical activity makes children healthier. "Exercise builds strong muscles, which promotes good posture and strong bones, and burns calories, which reduces body fat and improves both self-confidence and body image," Fiorotto said.

Active children who become active lean adults also have less risk of diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and some cancers.

Fiorotto recommends that children do some type of

vigorous activity such as swimming, biking, in-line skating, or running, three to five times a week.

Children need to get their heart rate up for at least 20 minutes to improve cardiovascular fitness.

"Once children don't tire as quickly, they can concentrate on learning basic skills and having fun," said Fiorotto. By teaching children to pace themselves and encouraging them play outdoors or participate in sports, parents may turn "I can't" attitudes into "I can."

DR. DEXTER MORRIS, OPTOMETRIST

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