**Health Briefs**

by LAURIE LARSON  
News Writer

**Passive smoke exposure**

Mothers' smoking habits are more harmful than fathers' to their children's health, according to research reported in the Feb. 5 *British Medical Journal* (BMJ).

Salivary cotinine concentration, a nicotine byproduct, was measured in 4,043 British children ages 5 years to 7 years, to determine their passive smoke exposure. Subjects also took home questionnaires which surveyed parents' smoking habits and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Fifty-three percent of children surveyed were exposed to at least one smoker, most commonly a parent. Although mothers were less likely to smoke than fathers, the effect on children's cotinine concentrations was higher when they did, and cotinine concentrations were higher in younger children and girls, the report stated.

Researchers speculated that those children's higher cotinine levels resulted from them spending more time with mothers than fathers and other adults. Children not exposed to smoke at home had lower cotinine concentrations, depending on the prevalence of smoking in the community, researchers stated.

Late vocalization might indicate hearing loss

Infants with normal hearing should be making familiar baby noises such as "da-da" and "ma-ma" by age 11 months, a recent study showed. If not, they may have severe hearing impairment.

Ninety-four hearing infants, and 37 infants with severe to profound hearing impairment were involved in the study published in February's *The Journal of Pediatrics*.

"Cannibalizing" was produced virtually all infants with normal hearing between the ages of 5 months and 11 months, study results showed. Infants who could not make these noises universally were found to have severe to profound hearing loss. Infants with hearing loss did not produce cannibalizing until about age 2 years, indicating that the onset or lack of cannibalizing by age 11 months is a highly accurate measure of hearing impairment, researchers stated.

The study concluded that early hearing-aid intervention for hearing-impaired infants is critical to successful language acquisition.

**Survivors of near drownings**

Nearly drowned children who show spontaneous, purposeful movements and normal brain activity within 24 hours of their injury do not suffer permanent neurologic damage, according to a study reported in the February *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*.

Mothers' smoking habits are more harmful than fathers' to children's health, according to recent research published in a British journal.

The 44 children studied were comatose or had other brain abnormalities immediately following near-drowning, the researchers reported. Of the children studied, 27 did not show normal brain function and spontaneous, purposeful movements within 24 hours of near-drowning and eventually died, or required total custodial care, due to severe neurologic deficits.

**Cancer pain guidelines**

The Public Health Service's Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR) has developed a new set of clinical practice guidelines for treating cancer pain.

The guidelines, available in English and Spanish, advocate early and aggressive pain treatment with narcotics. Addiction is an unrealistic fear in treating cancer pain, and decreased pain equals increased strength to fight cancer, the guidelines stated.

The use of early, noninjection drug therapies, combined with relaxation exercises, imagery and hypnosis should be especially helpful in treating childhood cancer, in those who often hide pain for fear of being given injections, guideline authors stated.

Single, free copies of *Management of Cancer Pain: A Quick Reference Guide for Clinicians*, and bulk purchases in English and Spanish are available through the National Cancer Institute at (800) 422-6237 or by fax (301) 594-2800.

**What children know about AIDS**

Children know a great deal about acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and how it is transmitted, but still retain many misconceptions, according to a study reported in the *Spring Health Education Quarterly*.

Twenty-seven groups of children in grades three to six were asked questions about the cause, transmission, consequences and prevention of AIDS. Children in all four grade levels knew AIDS was transmitted through sexual contact, injection exposure and in utero, but many believed erroneously in additional transmission methods. Many did not know what HIV stands for, or its relation to AIDS.

Fifth graders were confused about the relationship between reproduction, different methods of birth control, and AIDS transmission. In addition to condoms, many thought diaphragms and other forms of birth control could prevent AIDS.

Younger children connected needle-sharing with AIDS, but could not describe how the transmission took place. All children surveyed believed blood transfusions and cuts were common transmission routes. Some children believed AIDS also could be transmitted on toilet seats, drinking cups, food, marijuana and even clothing that people with AIDS had worn.

Researchers concluded that information given to younger children should be simple and concrete. Older children should have AIDS explained in the context of sexual education, to avoid confusion between ways of getting pregnant and ways of getting AIDS.

**Relief from sickle-cell pain**

A new therapy for children and adolescents suffering with acute sickle-cell crisis disease has been discovered by George Buchanan, M.D., FAAP, and researchers at Southwestern Medical Center at the University of Texas in Dallas.

Their study, published in the March 17 *New England Journal of Medicine*, found the corticosteroid, methylprednisolone, in combination with pain medication given upon hospital admission, helped reduce pain, and shortened hospital stays for young sickle-cell patients by one-third.

**Early signs of autism**

A combination of parental reports and clinical observation is the best method for identifying early signs of autism, according to a study in the *February Archives of Adolescent and Pediatric Medicine*.

The study of children younger than 4 years attempted to determine which behaviors most accurately predict the onset of autism, and whether parents or clinicians would be more likely to observe these behaviors.

Parents and clinicians agreed on five danger signs: abnormal social play, lack of awareness of others, imitation of others, deficient nonverbal communication, and impaired imaginative play.

Parents were found to be better judges of imaginative play, peer friendships, and the presence of stenotypic body movements. Researchers concluded that clinicians and parents have different perspectives regarding the "abnormality" of a child's behavior.

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