

Are We Making Our Children Sick?

Written by Maya Shetreat-Klein, M.D.

Thursday, 01 December 2016 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 14 September 2017 07:40

Sometimes even the best of intentions have unforeseen consequences

Chronic illness has become the new normal for children. Yet much of what is being done to children— medications they receive like Tylenol and antibiotics, the bleach and Purell we use to sanitize, processed foods they eat in school cafeterias and their own homes, and even time they spend trapped in a classroom or doing homework instead of playing outdoors—play a significant role in this growing epidemic.

*Dr. Maya Shetreat-Klein believes that children's bodies naturally have the capacity to be healthy and heal when they have the tools to do so. In her recent book, *The Dirt Cure*, she details a plan that starts with the soil, using fresh foods and nature to heal children from the inside out and the outside in. Revealing the profound connections between food, nature, and children's health, she explains how food is constantly changing kids' bodies, brains, and even genes—for better or for worse. She also shares success stories from her practice and tips as a working mother of three on stocking healing foods (from veggies to chocolate!), reading labels, and getting even picky eaters into the new menu. This paradigm-shifting book empowers you to transform your child's health through food and ensure the long-term wellbeing of your kids and the entire family.*

Below, Dr. Maya fields many of the questions she's often asked about her work.

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What is The Dirt Cure?

The Dirt Cure explains how the health of our inner terrain reflects the health of the terrain around us. It's allowing kids to be exposed to germs and microbes. It's feeding them fresh, unprocessed food from healthy soil. And it's making sure that kids spend plenty of time outdoors in nature.

How is chronic illness the new normal?

A healthy child gets sick and bounces back within a couple of days. Children today are exposed to fewer beneficial challenges—fewer microbes, less fresh food, and time outdoors in nature. Challenges create resilience, which is the key component of good health. A child who doesn't have the resilience to bounce back in the face of a challenge will become chronically ill.

Germs

Exposing kids to germs on purpose? Every classroom has hand sanitizer and bleach spray to keep kids from getting sick. Aren't germs

infections like chronic coughs or the flu. Many hand sanitizers contain toxic triclosan, even though studies show that soap does just as good a job at cleaning hands. We actually need exposures to microbes. We think we are protecting children by sanitizing them, but in fact it is the opposite.

So infections can be good?
They can be. In most cases, it's not the germ itself that's the problem; it's the health of the person who has the germ. Small infections are opportunities for the immune system to flex its muscles, but we act like they are unequivocally bad—we jump to medicate with Tylenol and ibuprofen or antibiotics right away. Think of the immune system learning in terms of your learning to play the violin. You can't expect to play the violin well at a performance if you always bring someone in to practice for you, or have your hand slipped away every time you try to play. Yet that's what we're doing to children's immune systems.

Name a few examples of good microbes.
Certain strains of bacteria, called *Chlostridia*, induce the body to produce proteins that prevent severe allergic reactions. Certain childhood viruses help our bodies recognize and fight cancer. In areas of the world where digestive parasites are common, rates of type 2 and 1 diabetes are much lower than in other parts of the world. Exposure to lots of different microbes teaches our bodies how to downregulate any one organism from replicating out of control, which is how microbes can kill us.

How do you determine between a good illness and a bad one? Many parents see fever as the barometer. Would you agree?
Fever is a temperature over into a degree and is actually the sign of a healthy immune system—it means the body's natural defenses are working. Some chronically ill children don't get fevers at all, which doesn't reflect well on their immune systems. The most important thing is to look at the whole child. If a child is acting fairly normal, or even being around looking miserable or being the feveriest, necessarily the sign of anything serious. The American Academy of Pediatrics doesn't necessarily recommend treating fevers in these children if their temperatures are under 102. Instead, let them rest, give them plenty to drink, including nourishing soups, and use cold compresses with a couple drops of peppermint essential oil to keep them comfortable. Cause for alarm would be a severely ill child who is very lethargic, or extremely irritable or inconsolable, or in pain. Sometimes parents have an intuition that something is really wrong. Those children should be evaluated by a healthcare professional immediately.

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FOOD
Why are children having food allergies and seasonal allergies these days?
Our immune systems are very social, and they meet and greet all sorts of things every day: food, microbes, dirt. When their interactions are limited, they get bored and cause trouble. We've known for some time that children who grow up on farms develop fewer allergies and asthma. We thought it was due to something called the Hygiene Hypothesis, which states that children are so sanitized that it's causing them to be chronically sick. And that's true, with a twist. It turns out that researchers found that an urban apartment had the same number of microbes as the farm. But the difference was that the microbes on the farm were more diverse. Eating diverse foods help prevent allergy for the same reason—because it teaches the immune system's social needs. Biodiversity in microbes, in our food, and in our soil is the key to healthy bodies and brains.

In your book, you make a case for the connection between what children eat and things like chronic ear infections, enlarged tonsils, asthma, headaches, and even autism. Can you explain?
When a child's gut, immune system, and nervous system don't have the opportunity to be exposed to plenty of diet—through diverse food, germs, and nature—they become a bit paranoid, and may come to regard things like food or pollen as an enemy. While acute inflammation is important for healing, chronic inflammation happens all over the body and leads to chronic illness. The one named in the literature is a strand of fat, what it becomes inflamed, it blocks normal flow which can lead to bacterial ear infections. Chronic inflammation causes asthma in the lungs, eczema in the skin, and triggers neurological symptoms in the brain: ADHD, tic, Tourette's, and autism spectrum. Data suggests that inflammation related to reactive foods like dairy and gluten can trigger all of these conditions.

What's the first step to cleaning up a child's diet?
First and foremost, environmental removing food chemicals in the diet, because that alone can resolve a lot of symptoms. Look for the Big Five hidden MSG, artificial sweeteners, food dyes, preservatives, and high fructose corn syrup. I provide a guide for this in my book, but the easiest method

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bad?

“Germs” is just a pejorative term for microbes. Consider: We have 3–4 pounds of microbes—bacteria, viruses, fungi, even parasites—in our digestive tracts, where they help us digest our food, regulate our immune systems, produce neurotransmitters, and make us smarter, more focused, and happier. A recent study showed that children exposed to bleach cleaners are actually 20 percent likelier to have infections like chronic coughs or the flu. Many hand sanitizers contain toxic triclosan, even though studies show that soap does just as good a job at cleaning hands. We actually need exposures to microbes. We think we are protecting children by sanitizing them, but in fact it is the opposite.

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How do you determine between a good illness and a bad one? Many parents use fever as the barometer. Would you agree?

Fever is a temperature over 100.4 degrees and is actually the sign of a healthy immune system—it means the body's natural defenses are working. Some chronically ill children don't get fevers at all, which doesn't reflect well on their immune systems. The most important thing is to look at the whole child. If a child is acting fairly normal, or even laying

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When a child's gut, immune system, and nervous system don't have the opportunity to be exposed to plenty of dirt—through diverse food, germs, and nature—they become a bit paranoid, and may come to regard things like food or pollen as an enemy. While acute inflammation is important for healing, chronic inflammation happens all over the body and leads to chronic illness. The ear canal is the diameter of a strand of hair; when it becomes inflamed, it blocks normal flow which can lead to bacterial ear infections. Chronic inflammation causes asthma in the lungs, eczema in the skin, and triggers neurological symptoms in the brain: ADHD, tics, headaches, and even seizures. Data supports that inflammation related to reactive foods like dairy and gluten can trigger all of these conditions.

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What's the first step to cleaning up a child's diet?

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How do you recommend addressing allergens in the diet?

If the health problems don't improve or disappear, it's time to look at common allergens in your child's diet: dairy, gluten, soy, corn, eggs, citrus, nuts, and shellfish. If you notice that every time your child eats a certain food, he or she gets red cheeks or ears, or gets hyperactive or foggy, or has other physical or mood symptoms—that may be a culprit. If the problem is severe, or is going on all the time, we remove a high-allergy food that they eat a lot—usually dairy or gluten—for a one-month trial and look for improvement.

What are five foods you think kids should eat to protect them during flu season?

Pastured meat, milk, butter, and eggs: Animals raised outdoors as they're meant to be embody the elements of nature that make them—and us—healthy and happy. Fresh air, water, soil, plants, and sunshine become part of the eggs, butter, and meat we eat. Those products actually are measurably higher in many nutrients, including Vitamin D, a key immune-system vitamin. And high cholesterol in egg yolks are associated with improved immunity and fewer infections.

Bitters: Bitter compounds in foods improve digestion, which helps things like reflux and constipation. They regulate appetite and blood sugar, and they boost the immune system in the gut and the ear, nose, throat, and lungs. You may be thinking that your child would never eat anything bitter, but it can be as simple as peeling vegetables in strips, having a nice cup of chamomile tea, or a steaming mug of high-quality hot cocoa with some orange zest (both of which act as bitters).

Raw unprocessed honey: High blood sugar can actually suppress the immune system, but

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sweeteners like raw honey, maple syrup, and molasses have surprising health benefits. Molasses is very nutrient-dense and has many times more antioxidants than a serving of blueberries. Honey has been shown to treat coughs more effectively than over-the-counter medication. Honey given with a diabetes medication lowered blood sugar more than the medication alone.

Fermented foods: Sauerkraut, dilly beans, naturally fermented pickles, kefir, and some yogurts all are ways to preserve fresh foods like vegetables and milk to last the winter. The side benefit is that they are filled with some of those diverse microbes that boost your child's gut health, brain function, and immunity.

Time In Nature

A lot of parents keep their children indoors because they're worried about safety, and even parents who want their children to be able to play outdoors find that school and homework get in the way. How does this affect their health?

Children who spend time in highly natural settings, like forests or specially designed playgrounds, have healthier brains and bodies than those who spend time in less natural settings. Time in nature boosts anti-cancer proteins and improves stress levels, sleep, mood, focus, and executive function. Children who spend time outdoors are also smarter, more creative, more focused, perform better on tests, and are more compliant. Being exposed to hours of natural sunlight each day helps prevent nearsightedness. Microbes found in soil called *Mycobacterium vaccae* can boost serotonin in ways similar to pharmaceutical antidepressants.

A great deal of research demonstrates that children function better when they spend a lot of time outdoors on a regular basis, but we don't apply this research by changing how children spend their days. Most kids are indoors all day for school, with maybe 20 minutes of recess, and then are inside doing homework all evening to get a couple of hours of screen time as a reward. We may be medicating many kids for problems that could be more effectively treated by making mud pies, jumping in piles of leaves, gardening, or hiking for a couple of hours a day.

A dirty child is a healthy and happy child.

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What are three ways you practice the Dirt Cure in your own family?

I don't treat my children's fevers whenever possible. I let them sleep, I give them plenty of nutrient-dense fluids—especially teas, soups, and bone broths—and I keep them as comfortable as possible. We eat the freshest, soil-sourced food possible. We keep our own chickens in the middle of New York City, and my children help gather their eggs. We grow some of our food together, we shop at farmers' markets together, we cook together, and we eat at least one meal a day together. We get outside in all weather, even if it's just to walk our dog. We garden, and we make games of identifying trees, mushrooms, and birds while we hike.

How can parents start the Dirt Cure for their children right now?

Get nourished. Eliminate as much processed food from their children's diets as possible, and replace it with fresh, soil-sourced foods that don't come in packages. Avoid shopping in supermarkets, and bring your children to farmers' markets or farms to buy food. Always try for USDA Organic or biodynamic, Demeter-certified products to avoid exposing your child to traces of pesticides, hormones, and antibiotics. Consider growing some of your own—anything from herbs on the windowsill to a community garden where you can start to keep a few chickens for eggs.

Get outside: Play sports or make mud pies, jump in leaves, go snowshoeing, get binoculars and spot birds, walk your dog in a state park, go geocaching in the forest, or take your book or homework outside.

Get germey: Don't fear fever, but learn to support your child with plenty of rest, good healing food like green veggies, soups and bone broths, teas with a spoonful of raw honey, and doses of elderberry syrup, which helps fight flus and colds. Minimize the use of fever-reducing meds, stop cleaning with bleach and toss out your hand sanitizer and air fresheners.

In your book, you tell the story of how your son developed rashes, asthma, and developmental regression that began on his first birthday, which started you on the road to this scientific investigation. What happened?

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My son had been developing normally and was an early talker, but on his first birthday, he mysteriously began a cycle of asthma and mysterious rashes, and he stopped gaining new milestones. No doctors we saw were particularly bothered by any of this—they just put him on endless courses of antibiotics and steroids and asthma meds. No one was interested in the root cause or asking why. I finally found a doctor to skin-test him for a soy allergy, and his whole arm blew up. Within a week of stopping soy, his asthma and rashes stopped, and he began to gain milestones. What I learned with my son was that much of what we think we're doing right for children in the short run may be harming them in the long run. For example, after we removed soy, our biggest task was to heal my son from the treatments that the doctors had prescribed.

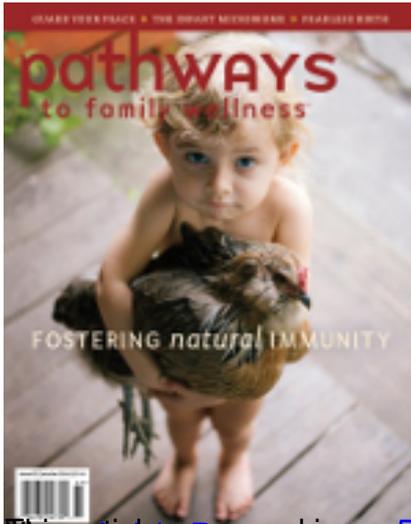
What else did you do?

First, we eliminated bad players as much as possible. I first understood that soy and soybean oil was hidden in most processed and restaurant foods. Even though I considered myself a healthy eater, I began to realize that I really had no idea what hidden ingredients I was putting into my children's bodies. We dramatically reduced processed foods and cooked with fresh, organic ingredients whenever possible. The flip side of processed foods are fresh, nutrient-dense foods: pastured meat and eggs, lots of fresh vegetables and fruit with a bit of their bitter peels, with less pasta and bread and more whole grains. I threw out white sugar and only used small amounts of natural sweeteners like raw honey, maple syrup, and molasses. He responded beautifully, and I began to use this approach successfully with children in my practice.

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