



January 2009 Issue #08

## obesity

NOT THE DECLINE WE ANTICIPATED?

## nut hysteria

NEW ADVICE NEEDED?

**PLEASE REMEMBER TO USE OUR NEW TELEPHONE NUMBER TO ARRANGE APPOINTMENTS AT OUR MAIN CITY BISHOPSGATE OFFICE: TELEPHONE 0845 4370691.**

## nut avoidance reaching 'hysterical' levels

**FEAR OF NUT ALLERGIES IS CREATING "MASS HYSTERIA", ACCORDING TO AN EXPERT LAST MONTH.**

Professor Nicolas Christakis from Harvard Medical School, writes on the website of the British Medical Journal that some decisions taken to avoid exposure to nuts are based on irrational fears and are "becoming increasingly sensationalist". He states that in the USA 150 people die each year from food allergies. This is compared to 50 who die from bee stings, 100 who die from lightning strikes, 45,000 who die in motor vehicle accidents, and 10,000 who are hospitalised for traumatic brain injury from playing sport. "But these issues do not incur such extreme reactions, such as calling for an end to sport," he writes.

He relates the story of a peanut on the floor of a school bus leading to evacuation and "decontamination" in case it might be eaten by one of the ten-year-old passengers.

There are three problems with such actions, he warns. "Firstly, these responses represent a gross over-reaction to the magnitude of the threat. Secondly, there is no scientific evidence that the particular restrictions being imposed are effective or that they warrant the costs incurred. And, thirdly, and most importantly, these responses are making things worse."

Complete avoidance of nuts may result in children who are actually sensitised to them. "Through a feedback loop the policy of avoidance ends up creating the epidemic it is trying to stop," Professor Christakis warns.

The responses bear many of the hallmarks of mass psychogenic illness, or "epidemic hysteria", he writes, the recommended treatment for which includes "providing reassurance and using a calm and authoritative approach".

The British Medical Journal, 2008;337:a2880.

## peanut pregnancy advice may change

Two days after the above article was published, a British agency has changed its advice on avoiding peanuts during pregnancy. According to the Food Standards Agency, women who are pregnant or breast-feeding need not worry about avoiding peanuts - unless their families are at high risk.

Since 1998 women have been advised to avoid peanuts for fear the baby might develop peanut allergy. The FSA has received a

report from another agency, the Committee on Toxicity, which says the latest evidence does not support the 1998 advice.

An FSA spokesman said: "In the meantime, for high-risk groups there is no need for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding or who have children aged under three to change their diets. Where there is a family history of allergy, parents might want to discuss their individual case with their

GP or health professional if they are concerned. Government

advice for all mothers is that they should exclusively breastfeed for around the first six months of an infant's life and not introduce any solids until after this age."

The UK department of health says it is yet to decide whether to change its own guidance.



# obesity stabilising?

**EARLY SIGNS SUGGEST THAT DIRE PREDICTIONS ABOUT BRITAIN'S FUTURE GIRTH MAY NOT BE REALISED.**

A project to weigh and measure Britain's schoolchildren has found that this year's are no fatter than last year's. Government officials stressed it was "too early" to draw conclusions from the analysis of the project - which measured nearly a million schoolchildren in the early years of school.

A department of health spokesman said: "The statistics show there has been no significant change in the prevalence of overweight and obese children in both Reception and Year 6. However, it is too early to predict that the rates of obesity and being overweight among children have stabilised."

The figures show that about a quarter of four and five year olds are overweight or obese. By the age of 11 this has risen to one in three. Children's minister Baroness Delyth Morgan said: "We are making good progress in fighting childhood obesity. Parents need to make the right choices about living healthy lives - and weighing and measuring is a vital part of that. Our

reforms mean we are well placed for the future. Introducing tough nutritional standards for school lunches and getting more children than ever before playing high quality school sport and PE."

Last month an academic study claimed that one in three adults - some 13 million people - will be obese by 2012.

The analysis in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health is based on the rate of increase of obesity between 1993 and 2004 - when it doubled in men and increased by 50 per cent among women.

J Epidemiol Community Health 2008 doi 10.1136/jech.2008



## lack of sleep raises cold risk

**SLEEPING FOR UNDER SEVEN HOURS A NIGHT GREATLY RAISES THE RISK OF CATCHING A COLD**

A team from Carnegie Mellon University found the risk was trebled compared with those who slept for eight hours or more a night. It is thought that a lack of sleep impairs the immune system and the body's ability to fight off the viruses that cause colds and flu. The study appears in the journal Archives of Internal Medicine.

Previous research has suggested that people who sleep seven to eight hours a night have the lowest rates of heart disease. However, there has been little direct evidence that getting a good night's sleep can help ward off a cold.

The researchers studied 153 healthy men and women with an average age of 37 between 2000 and 2004. They were quarantined

and given nasal drops containing rhinovirus.

### Sleep quality

The less an individual slept, the more likely they were to develop a cold. The quality of sleep also appeared to be important. Volunteers who spent less than 92% of their time in bed asleep were five-and-a-half times more likely to become ill than those who were asleep for at least 98% of their time in bed.

The researchers believe that lack of good quality sleep disturbs regulation of key chemicals produced by the immune system to fight infection.

Professor Ron Eccles, director of the Common Cold Centre at the University of Cardiff, said sleep

and the immune system were closely linked. He said: "The immune system may control the sleep-wake pattern and lack of sleep or sleep disturbance may depress the immune response to infection. I do believe there is enough information on this to indicate that lack of sleep or sleep disturbance will reduce our resistance to infections such as colds and flu."

Dr Adrian Williams, director of the Sleep Disorders Centre at St Thomas' Hospital, London, said the study echoed previous work in animals suggesting sleep had an effect on immunity.

The authors suggested that seven to eight hours sleep per night would seem a reasonable target.

Arch Intern Med. 2009;169(1):62-67

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