

In science class, we were taught that it is exposure to germs that makes us sick. Germ theory has been used to rationalize an increasingly sterile environment. Unfortunately, resistant bacteria and weakened immune systems are the result.

Most hand sanitizers are gelled alcohol. They are only effective if they are 70% or more alcohol. They kill the weakest 99.9% of bacteria. So, instead of developing an appropriate immune response to a broad variety of bacteria, our kids are exposed only to the strongest 0.1%.

Their exposure to those bacteria may be more likely to travel into the skin because the alcohol based hand sanitizers create dried out micro-fissures in the skin, creating an avenue for bacteria to travel into the body.

Some other hand sanitizers are made with chlorhexidine or triclosan which may create resistance to oral antibiotics.

We have already created many resistant bacteria through antibiotic overuse. The end result of our efforts to create a sterile environment is not that our kids are healthier; it is that they are more fragile.

When we were little, mom would kick us out in the morning so that she could get things done inside. We played all day long in the dirt. We were exposed to healthy soil organisms that helped populate our digestive tracts with probiotic bacteria that helped prevent illness through competition with bad bacteria.

Now, an increasing number of kids spend the majority of their time in an indoor environment playing Playstation or watching TV. If that environment is treated with air and surface sanitizers, how do we develop appropriate immune system responses?

I'm reminded of the epidemics brought to the Native Americans by explorers. They had no appropriate immune system responses programmed by exposure during childhood. Many died of illnesses that most European children would have survived.

Our kids don't develop their immune systems by gradual exposure. They are inundated with vaccines to a myriad of illnesses while they are infants with an immature blood brain barrier. Some people theorize that the increase in the rate of multiple sclerosis, autism, and mental illness may relate to these vaccines being given so early.

There are studies showing that hand sanitizers reduce the rate of transmission of stomach bugs that cause diarrhea. It can be really inconvenient for our kids to get sick. We really need to consider, however, whether we are trading our convenience now for an adulthood filled with constant battles with stronger and stronger bacteria.

Instead of slathering yourself or your kids with hand sanitizer, Wash your hands with warm water long enough to sing "Happy Birthday" twice. Rinse with cold water that is less hospitable to bacteria that like living in warm bodies. Consider a soap that has grapefruit seed extract or tea tree oil if you are around sick people. Save the sanitizer for hospital stays or at home care after surgery.

Let your kids get dirty. Encourage them to play outside. Kids are made to be tough. If our kids were as fragile as these sanitation products imply, we would all be extinct. The physical effects of over sanitation are becoming clear. The mental effects of convincing kids that they are weak and must avoid all germs remain to be seen.

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