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Health

Health Highlights: Oct. 14, 2007

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Here are some of the latest health and medical news developments, compiled by editors of *HealthDay*:

More Family Dinners Seen as Help in Fighting Teen Obesity

The family that eats together may have healthy weight together.

So say University of Minnesota researchers who studied ways parents could help their obese teenage children lose weight.

According to the *Associated Press*, the scientists, who studied the eating habits of more than 2,500 adolescents over a five year period found that 44 percent of the girls and 20 percent of the boys had weight issues. Among these, 25 percent of the females and 10 percent of the males used extreme measures to control their weight, including vomiting and laxatives.

"We know that these behaviors tend to actually increase weight gain over time, the *A.P.* quotes lead author Dianne Neumark-Sztainer as saying. "It points to a need to address these behaviors with... overweight kids."

Part of the solution, the researchers concluded, was to have as many family meals together as possible, with no teasing about eating habits, and offering healthful menus. This should accompany family participation in outdoor activities and exercise, the wire service reported.

The study is to be published in the November issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Fearful Expressions More Rapidly Identified, Study Says

The old axiom that some animals can "smell" fear in another creature has been found to have a slightly different face -- literally -- when it comes to humans recognizing when someone is afraid.

Researchers at Vanderbilt University say they have found evidence that the human brain recognizes fear in a person's face more quickly than it does other emotions.

In a study appearing in the November issue of the journal *Emotion*, scientists from Vanderbilt's department of psychology attempted to find out how quickly humans could recognize emotional changes in each other's faces, according to a university news release.

Using a technique called continuous flash suppression that keeps people from becoming aware of what they are seeing for up to 10 seconds, the researchers were able to project multiple images to study participants. What they found was that fearful faces were most immediately recognizable.

The reason for this, said David Zald, associate professor of psychology and a co-author of the study, may be because a brain area called the amygdala shortcuts the normal brain pathway for processing visual images.

"We think the amygdala has some crude ability to process stimuli and that it can cue some other visual areas to what they need to focus on," Zald said in the university news release. "Fearful eyes are a particular shape, where you get more of the whites of the eye showing," he added.

"That may be the sort of simple feature that the amygdala can pick up on."

Smoking Could Speed MS Disability

Smokers with multiple sclerosis show more evidence of brain tissue shrinkage on MRI scans than people with the illness who do not smoke, U.S. researchers say.

A team at the University of Buffalo's Buffalo Neuroimaging Analysis Center (BNAC) compared the MRIs of 368 MS patients, 128 of who had a history of smoking. Most of the patients had one of the three most common forms of MS -- relapsing-remitting (acute

attacks with recovery), primary-progressive (steadily worsening), or secondary progressive (occasional attacks with progression).

Smokers had higher disability scores than nonsmokers, as well as lower brain volumes. As packs-per-day smoked increased, the volume of the neocortex -- a key brain area linked to higher thinking -- shrank, the team said.

Based on the findings, "MS patients should be counseled to stop smoking, or at least to cut down so they can preserve as much brain function as possible," lead researcher Dr. Robert Zivadinov, professor of neurology and director of the BNAC, said in a statement.

The findings were to be presented Saturday at the Congress of the European Committee for the Treatment and Research in Multiple Sclerosis, in Prague, Czech Republic.

Staph Skin Infections Spreading in U.S. Schools

Schools across America are reporting outbreaks of *Staphylococcus aureus* skin infections, some of them drug-resistant, according to the *Associated Press*. Most infections are being spread in school gyms and locker rooms as athletes with minor cuts and abrasions share equipment, experts said.

"Most of these are mild infections," Nicole Coffin, spokeswoman at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told the *AP*. "They can be as simple as a pimple or a boil, or as serious as a blood infection."

Most worrisome are cases of methicillin-resistant *staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), which resists treatment with many antibiotics. In a Newport News, Va., high school, four students were infected with staph, one of them carrying the MRSA strain. That patient, a football player, was briefly hospitalized this week, the *AP* said.

Other outbreaks of a similar nature have occurred in schools in Illinois, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina, the *AP* added.

Experts say the best way to minimize the risk of staph skin infections is through frequent and thorough handwashing, by covering any wounds, and by avoiding sharing personal items such as towels and razors.

FDA Approves New AIDS Medication

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Friday approved a new kind of pill to fight AIDS.

According to the *Associated Press*, Merck & Co.'s Isentress could be a valuable new weapon for patients battling tough-to-treat forms of AIDS, since it targets an enzyme produced by HIV called integrase.

Existing medications do not act on this enzyme, but they do target two other enzymes crucial to HIV's infection and spread. Adding twice-a-day Isentress to standard drug cocktails should boost overall treatment effectiveness, the *AP* said.

A Merck spokeswoman said Isentress will cost about \$27 a day, similar to other HIV/AIDS medications, and the drug should be on pharmacy shelves within about 2 weeks. Side effects include diarrhea, nausea, headache and itching.

Report Raises Concerns About Lead in Lipsticks

Tests of 33 top-brand lipsticks sold in the United States showed that more than half had detectable levels of lead and 11 exceeded 0.1 parts per million, the federal lead limit for candy, says a report released Thursday by the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics.

"The cosmetics industry definitely has a lead problem," Stacy Malkan, a spokesperson for the coalition of environmental and public health groups advocating toxin-free products, told the *Houston Chronicle*.

L'Oreal, CoverGirl, Christian Dior and Maybelline were among the brands found to have high lead levels. For example, L'Oreal Colour Riche True Red had a lead content of 0.65 parts per million, L'Oreal Colour Riche Classic Wine had 0.58 parts per million and CoverGirl's Incredifull Lipcolor Maximum Red had 0.56 parts per million.

The lipstick samples were randomly collected in four cities -- Boston, Hartford, Conn., San Francisco, Minneapolis -- and tested by Bodycote Testing Group in Santa Fe Springs, Calif., the *Chronicle* reported.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said it's aware of past concerns about lead in lipstick and has no plans to take action in response to the report.

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