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Health Highlights: Oct. 13, 2007

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

Smoking Could Speed MS Disability

Smokers with multiple sclerosis show more evidence of brain tissue shrinkage on MRI scans than people with 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 368 128 of who had a history of smoking. Most of the patients had one of the three most common forms of MS -- remitting (acute attacks with recovery), primary-progressive (steadily worsening), or secondary progressive (or 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 much brain function as possible," lead researcher Dr. Robert Zivadinov, professor of neurology and director of 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' minor cuts and abrasions share equipment, experts said.

"Most of the cases are still infections," said Dr. [Name] [Last], director of the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention's [Department].

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 antibiotics. In a Newport News, Va., high school, four students were infected with staph, one of them carrying the 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 North Carolina, the *AP* added.

Experts say the best way to minimize the risk of staph skin infections is through frequent and thorough handwashing, 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 treatment-resistant 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. Adding twice-a-day Isentress to standard drug cocktails should boost overall treatment effectiveness, the *AP* says.

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

U.S. and China Discuss Product Safety

U.S. officials met with Chinese representatives Friday in an effort to develop a plan to ensure the safety of Chinese drugs and other products exported to the United States, the *Associated Press* reported.

While he wouldn't disclose any details about measures that China agreed to take to improve the safety of its exports, Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Dr. Andrew C. von Eschenbach did say that Chinese officials will visit the United States later this month to finalize details of a "memorandum of agreement" between the two nations.

"They are as concerned about confidence in the quality and safety of food and drugs as we are in the United States," von Eschenbach said, the *AP* reported.

China has faced intense international criticism due to a large number of serious health and safety problems in products it exports. On Thursday, the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee reported that China's food and drug chain does not meet international standards.

Sen. Kennedy Has Surgery for Artery Blockage

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, 75, underwent an hour-long operation Friday for a partial blockage in his neck's left carotid artery. The left and right carotid arteries carry blood to the head and blockages can cause a stroke.

A statement from Kennedy's office said the procedure was completed without any complications and Kennedy is

to be released from Massachusetts General Hospital in several days, the *Associated Press* reported.

This kind of surgery, called a carotid endarterectomy, is performed on more than 180,000 people in the United year.

Kennedy's blockage was discovered during a routine examination of an old back injury he suffered in a 1964 p the *AP* reported.

"As part of a routine evaluation of Senator Kennedy's back and spine, MRI studies picked up an unrelated, asy blockage in the senator's left carotid artery," said the statement from Kennedy's office.

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 le exceeded 0.1 parts per million, the federal lead limit for candy, says a report released Thursday by the Campa Cosmetics.

"The cosmetics industry definitely has a lead problem," Stacy Malkan, a spokesperson for the coalition of enviri 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 e L'Oreal Colour Riche True Red had a lead content of 0.65 parts per million, L'Oreal Colour Riche Classic Wine 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, Minneap 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 action in response to the report.

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