

# Ask the Pediatrician

Solving the Riddles of Parenthood



## 1. No Turtles, Please

**Q:** My 7-year-old son wants a small turtle for his birthday. Do turtles make good pets?

**A:** You may wish to consider a different animal. Turtles may spread disease, the most common being salmonella — bacteria that can cause severe illness and death. Reptiles, including turtles, transmit an estimated 74,000 cases of salmonella to people in the United States each year. Anyone can acquire this infection, but the risk is highest in infants, young children, elderly people, and others with lowered resistance to disease. There have been a number of turtle-related salmonella cases recently in the United States, including the death of a four-week old infant in Florida.

Turtles have become very popular pets in recent years. That's why the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) offers the following advice:

- Don't buy small turtles for pets. The FDA banned the sale of turtles smaller than four inches in 1975.
- Turtles should not be allowed in child-care centers or nursing homes. Turtles in public settings, such as petting zoos, should be kept from even indirect contact with people except in animal-contact areas with hand-washing facilities.
- If you do have a pet turtle, do not allow it to roam freely in your home, especially in the kitchen. Sinks should not be used to bathe turtles or to wash their cages, or aquariums. If bathtubs are used for these purposes, they should be cleaned thoroughly and disinfected with bleach.
- Make sure you and your children wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after handling turtles or their cages. Also, clean any surfaces that have come in contact with the turtle or its cage.

If your child has or comes in contact with a turtle, watch for symptoms of the disease, such as diarrhea, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, fever, and headache.

## 2. Choking Dangers

**Q:** Our 2-year-old puts anything and everything in his mouth, and we are afraid he is going to choke. Is this a common problem? What can we do to prevent him from hurting himself?

**A:** Choking is common among children. After all, children explore their world by putting things in their mouths. It's a serious problem because children who choke run the risk of death and permanent brain damage from lack of oxygen. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that there were more than 17,000 nonfatal choking episodes leading to the emergency room for U.S. children age 14 and under in 2001.

Food is the most common cause of choking. In addition, household items are choking hazards. Make a safe environment by keeping any items small enough to fit in the inside of a cardboard toilet paper tube away from infants and young children. Typical choking hazards include: balloons, coins, marbles, toys with small parts or that can be compressed to fit into a child's mouth, balls, pen or marker caps, and small button-type batteries.

Childproof your home by getting down on your child's level and looking for dangerous items before he begins to crawl. If you have older children, pay attention to their toys. Be sure your younger child can't get into them.

Keep this list of choking prevention tips in mind:

- Learn basic life support skills. Contact your local American Red Cross office or the American Heart Association to find out about classes in your area. You also can learn via DVD with *Infant CPR Anytime* (birth to 1 year) from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Heart Association. There's also *CPR Anytime for Families and Friends* (1 year to adult). Both personal learning programs can teach these life-saving skills in under 25 minutes. Your pediatrician also can help you understand these steps and talk to you about the importance of supervising mealtime and identifying dangerous foods and objects.
- Keep the following foods from children until 4 years of age: hot dogs; nuts and seeds; chunks of meat or cheese; whole grapes; hard, gooey, or sticky candy; popcorn; chunks of peanut butter; raw vegetables; raisins; and chewing gum.
- Insist that children eat at the table, or at least while sitting down. They should never run, walk, play, or lie down with food in their mouth.
- Cut food for infants and young children into pieces no larger than one-half inch. Teach them to chew their food well.

- Supervise mealtime for infants and young children.
- Be aware of older children's actions. Many choking incidents occur when older brothers or sisters give dangerous foods, toys, or small objects to a younger child.
- Follow the age recommendations on toy packages. Age guidelines reflect a toy's safety based on any possible choking hazard and the child's physical and mental abilities at different ages.
- Check under furniture and between cushions for small items that children could find and put in their mouths.

## 3. The Cruellest Cuts

**Q:** I have noticed lately that my 16-year-old daughter has cuts on her arms and legs, and I am afraid they are self-inflicted. Why would she do this to herself? What can I do?

**A:** Any concerns about self-inflicted injuries should be taken seriously since self-mutilation, self-harm, or self-abuse is a recognized behavior that warrants professional evaluation and treatment.

This behavior occurs when a person deliberately and impulsively harms himself or herself. It usually takes the form of cutting, scratching, hair pulling, bruising, or burning. This behavior usually begins in puberty, affects about one percent of the population, and is seen more with girls than boys. Often, the person is from a middle- to upper-class family, has low self-esteem, and feels that he or she has been discouraged from expressing emotions. Nearly 50 percent report having been physically or sexually abused.

Self-injurers say they feel empty inside. They report that they are lonely and feel misunderstood by others. Cutting themselves is their way to relieve painful feelings. This type of self-destructive behavior is not usually a suicide attempt. But those who do hurt themselves often suffer from psychiatric, bipolar, personality, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. Only a licensed psychiatric professional can make these diagnoses.

The first step to helping your daughter is to have her evaluated by a mental health professional. After evaluation, the mental health professional may prescribe a course of treatment — possibly therapy, hospitalization, a combination of medicine and behavioral therapy, or other treatments.