

Ask the Pediatrician

Solving the Riddles of Parenthood



1. Get the Lead Out

Q: Over the past several months, I have heard a lot about recalls of toys manufactured in China because they contain lead. Is this true? If so, how can I make sure my children's toys are safe?

A: Yes, you heard correctly. Both manufacturers and the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) have issued recalls for several types of children's toys and other products because their surface paint contained levels of lead that exceed U.S. safety standards. You can find a complete list of product recalls, along with instruction for returning recalled products, at the CPSC's Web site: www.cpsc.gov.

Children can be exposed to lead in a variety of ways. The most common way is by getting lead-contaminated dirt or dust on their hands, and then putting their hands in their mouth — or by putting toys or other objects that have lead content there. Children between the ages of six months to three years are at particular risk, since "mouthing" behavior is a normal part of their development at these ages.

Part of the problem with lead exposure is that the symptoms are hard to identify at low blood-lead levels. But lead in a child's blood stream, even at relatively low levels, can lead to problems with brain development, as well as learning and behavior issues.

It's important to realize that we are all exposed to lead, and as a result, have some lead in our bodies and bloodstream. But no "safe" level of lead has ever been defined, so it's important to keep lead exposure as low as possible, especially for children. If your child has been exposed to one or more of the toys that have been recalled for high-lead content, be sure to remove the object and discuss with your pediatrician. You can follow up on how to return the recalled toy to the retailer by following recall instructions.

2. It All Comes Out in the Wash

Q: I worry whether hand sanitizers are safe for children. I see them everywhere and wonder if they pose a health risk.

A: According to a recent study, the answer is yes, they do pose a health risk to toddlers.

A June report in *The New England Journal of Medicine* warns of dangers that alcohol-based hand sanitizers pose as intoxicants to high-risk populations like toddlers. Hand sanitizers can contain as much as 60 to 70 percent alcohol.

Killing germs with soap and warm water is still tops on many doctors' list. According to Dr. Larry Weiss, developer of an alcohol-free hand sanitizer, "If we could actually get people just to wash their hands five times a day with soap and water and do it right, we would cut the incidents of illness in about half."

So how do you know if your toddlers are washing their hands properly? According to the CDC, teach your children to:

- Wet their hands with clean running water and apply soap. Use warm water if it is available.
- Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces.
- Continue rubbing hands for 20 seconds. Need a timer? Sing "Happy Birthday" all the way through twice.
- Rinse hands well under running water.
- Dry their hands using a paper towel or air dryer. If possible, use their paper towel to turn off the faucet.

3. Safe Haunts

Q: For a couple of months now, my 7-year-old daughter and her friends have been planning for Halloween. They have been giving each other costume advice and plotting their trick-or-treat route. How can we, as their parents, help them be safe without ruining their fun?

A: Dressing up for Halloween, decorating the home, and trick-or-treating are some of the greatest highlights of the year for the majority of American children — and adults. In a 2005 survey, the National Retail Federation found that, collectively, consumers expected to spend \$3.29 billion on Halloween fun, up from \$3.12 billion in 2004. The following tips from the AAP should help your family have a safe and happy Halloween.

All Dressed Up

- Be sure your children's costumes are bright and reflective. Make sure their shoes fit well and their costumes are short enough to prevent them from tripping, getting

entangled, or coming into contact with fire.

- Add reflective tape or striping to costumes and trick-or-treat bags for greater visibility.
- Use non-toxic makeup and costume hats that fit properly.
- Buy costumes, wigs, and accessories that are flame resistant.
- Don't let your child carry a sword, cane, or stick that is too sharp or too long.
- Carry flashlights with fresh batteries.
- Have your children carry a mobile phone in case of an emergency. Teach them how and when to call 9-1-1.

On the Trick-or-Treat Trail

- A parent or responsible adult should accompany young children on their neighborhood rounds at all times.
- If your older children are going alone, plan and review a route that is acceptable to you. Agree on a specific time when they should return home.
- Children should only go to homes with a porch light on.
- Because pedestrian injuries are the most common type to affect children on Halloween, children should remain on well-lit streets and always use sidewalks and established crosswalks. If no sidewalk is available, walk at the far edge of the roadway facing traffic.
- Children should never cut across yards or use alleys, or enter a stranger's home or car for any reason.
- Remind your children not to assume that cars see them or will stop for them.
- Your children should contact law enforcement authorities immediately if they see any suspicious or unlawful activity.

Healthy Halloween

- Prepare your children a healthy meal prior to parties and trick-or-treating. That will discourage them from overdoing it with Halloween treats.
- Purchase non-food treats for those who visit your home, such as coloring books or pens and pencils.
- Closely examine all treats. Throw away any spoiled, unwrapped, or suspicious items.
- Try to ration treats for the days following Halloween.

