

Study finds pediatricians mistakenly think many parenting myths are true.

Although parents turn to their pediatrician for expert advice and accurate information about their child's health and development, findings from a new study suggest that thousands of pediatricians erroneously subscribe to various popular parenting myths. "In some cases, a child's well-being may be seriously compromised if parents are given misinformation by a pediatrician based on these misconceptions and old wives' tales," said Andrew Adesman, MD, lead investigator of this study and chief of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at the Steven and Alexandra Cohen Children's Medical Center of New York.

The "Dangerous Dozen" Health Beliefs

The majority of pediatricians (76 percent) mistakenly endorsed one or more of the "dangerous dozen" parenting myths as being true, and 13 percent got three or more wrong. For example:

- 33 percent said a burn can be treated with application of ice—*Risk: ice can also cause injury to the skin*
- 33 percent said it is safe to put a baby down to sleep on his side—*Risk: crib death*
- five percent said children can be given an ice bath to treat a fever—*Risk: hypothermia*
- five percent said children over age six can be given aspirin for a fever—*Risk: Reye's syndrome*

- five percent said place a soft object in a child's mouth child during a seizure—*Risk: dental injury to the child, hand injury to the adult*

- three percent said that babies younger than six months can be given honey—*Risk: botulism poisoning*

Old Wives Tales

Much larger percentages of pediatricians endorsed old wives' tales. Here are just a few examples of the mistaken beliefs:

- 15 percent said children should not swim until 30 minutes after eating;

- 17 percent said vitamin C helps ward off colds;

- 16 percent said eating carrots will improve a child's vision;

- eight percent said eating chocolate causes acne;

- 11 percent said listening to Mozart will make a baby smarter;

- seven percent said reading in the dark causes visual problems;

- 11 percent said sugar causes hyperactivity;

- seven percent said sitting too close to the TV will damage vision; and
- nine percent said sleeping with a night light causes nearsightedness.

Although Dr. Adesman said he was not surprised that large numbers of pediatricians endorsed old wives' tales, he noted that he is "very concerned that so many pediatricians failed to identify one or more parenting practices that could pose safety or health risks to children.

Raising young children and keeping them healthy is never easy, but doing so while relying on erroneous or misleading information can make parenting a particularly daunting challenge," he said. "Parents turn to their pediatrician for guidance and they must be confident that their pediatricians will provide them with accurate information."

Dr. Adesman's study was based on a questionnaire sent to a national sample of board-certified primary care pediatricians. The questionnaire contained a mix of 34 myths and 14 true statements; pediatricians were asked to identify to what extent each of the 48 health belief statements was true, likely true, unsure, likely false or false. Results were based on an analysis of more than 1,000 responses. Although most of the myths are benign "old wives' tales," Dr. Adesman noted there were a "dangerous dozen" health beliefs that reflected outdated or dangerous parenting beliefs that could pose a risk to a child's safety or well-being.

This is not the first time that Dr. Adesman has taken on the role of "pediatric myth buster." He recently wrote a book for parents that identifies and debunks more than 165 common myths (BabyFacts: the Truth about Your Child from Newborn through Preschool), and he is now putting in place plans to educate pediatricians-in-training about these parenting misconceptions.