

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 80 (2014)
Heft: [1]

Artikel: Mum's advice on health - does she really know best?
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943926>

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Health corner

Mum's advice on health – does she really know best?

Many changes have happened during my time in medicine. You were told to do one thing a few years ago – and now the advice is exactly the opposite. I have often been confused myself and find it hard to keep up. Below are a few teachings from earlier days. Some of them still apply, others are controversial and some have been turned upside down. Here we go:

If you or your child has a fever, you must get this temperature down, by a combination of Paracetamol, cooling them with a tepid bath or taking clothing off. The thinking now is quite different. If the body wants to be hot, let it be. Cooling someone down from the outside can be cruel if it makes them shiver; shivering creates heat, so it defeats the purpose. One theory is that the temperature helps to fight infection and should remain high, but this has not been proven. By all means use Paracetamol or similar for comfort, but the illness is not going to be any shorter for the fact that the temperature is down.

When your mucus (phlegm) turns green, you need an antibiotic! Makes a lot of sense? Green means bacteria which have to be treated with antibiotics? Sometimes this is true. Often it's a virus which creates the mucus. Later, bacteria may get into it, but they don't necessarily make the condition worse. By fighting them you don't (and cannot anyway) treat the underlying virus. You often will take just as long to get better with or without antibiotics and are more likely to experience side effects from them. Discuss with your health provider what's best – mind you, it's not always clear cut. S/he will look at other aspects of your illness, like temperature, shortness of breath, chest sounds, sinus pain, heart rate etc., maybe even ask for blood tests / X-rays.

Alcohol interferes with antibiotics: Never drink alcohol when you are taking them. Only partly true. The reason for this advice is mainly that when you are sick enough to need an antibiotic, alcohol is probably not the best idea. Only one antibacterial (Metronidazole, known also as Flagyl) must not be combined with alcohol. Don't overdo it though!

Washing hands with soap and water prevents many infections. Absolutely true, and so simple. For common everyday use you do not need expensive antiseptic soaps. It's different in hospitals.

Drinking fluids should be delayed if you or your child have a vomiting bug. Vomits are always impressive. Often, it seems like everything the child has taken in and more is brought back. This may be the case, but often part of the fluid the child has taken still stays in the body and prevents dehydration. So: Continue drinking fluids. The idea is to give small amounts often (a teaspoon every minute) rather than a big glass full.

Flat lemonade, or Powerade, are good drinks for tummy bugs (vomiting/diarrhoea). Wrong. Both are far too sweet. Excess sugar in the gut draws water and makes the diarrhoea worse. If it has to be lemonade or another soft drink, dilute it to one part of drink and four parts of water.

For mild diarrhoea, water is good enough, as is tea or a clear soup. When I studied in Berne, we were given a recipe for carrot soup which still is around now, 100 years after its creation and seems to work, too. They also use grated apple or bananas there. All this applies for relatively mild diarrhoea. If your child is unwell, listless, feverish, drowsy or has lost weight (5% or more of body weight), it's time to see a health professional. Often, the electrolyte solution taken by mouth works. They use this much more in hospital now too, whereas in earlier years the children were often given drips, which can be quite a challenge.

Wounds heal better when they are exposed to air. It's the opposite: Wounds should be covered. That's how nature has it anyway: A crust is formed and the new skin grows underneath. New tissue needs moisture to grow. There are various dressings you can get which do just that, keep the moisture in.



Bed rest helps you recover better from an illness. My mother's rule was: After a fever we had to stay in bed for a day, then inside the house for a day, then were we allowed outside. Today's thinking is different. Not only does the bed rest make no difference; you also lose your fitness and feel miserable.

A couch is just as good, getting up if you can helps. If you feel like smelling the roses, do go outside despite feeling sick.

If your back hurts, something is wrong and you must not make any moves that provoke the pain. There is a fine line between resting and moving. It applies to the rest of your body too, not just your back. Often people get better faster by being active, even by going to work. Of course there are instances when it is not possible.

Don't use your blue asthma inhaler: People have died from it. Unfortunately, there have been and still are deaths from asthma. It's not so common from overuse of inhaler, but more often patients don't realise that they need more treatment than a blue inhaler. If your asthma is not relieved promptly by occasional use of a blue inhaler, you do need further management. See your health professional!

People with normal weight live longer than obese people. This may not be true. You may have read about this earlier last year. Some clever researcher looked at many studies and worked out that being mildly overweight may in fact protect you from an early death!

It just goes to show how little we know. I hope you will be around to find out whether it was right not to shed those extra Christmas pounds! Can you think of other controversial teachings from yesteryears? Or want to comment anyway? I'm interested in your opinion: Send a letter to the editor or to myself.

By Nelly Steinemann