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HEALTH SCAN: Mary Poppins was almost right

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Mary Poppins sang: "Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down..."

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Main

But researchers have found that giving a bit of artificial sweetener to healthy newborns when taking blood from their heels for a genetic test significantly reduces the amount of pain they feel.

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A foreign research team headed by Dr. H.U. Bucher published its findings in Early Human Development, and it was translated for publication recently in the Hebrew-language Israel Journal of Symptoms and Pain Control.

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The researchers suggested using a bit of saccharine and cyclamate instead of ordinary sucrose sugar, which can harm infants who are sensitive to this natural sweetener and can eventually lead to a "sweet tooth" and dental cavities when they grow older. The artificial sweetener was given to healthy four-day-old infants immediately before the needle prick was carried out; control groups were instead given mother's milk, water or glycerine. The reactions of the 80 babies tested were captured on video. The babies cried, but those given the artificial sweetener (which did not pose any health danger in such small amounts) calmed down much faster than those given the mother's milk, water and glycerine, indicating that they felt less pain. In fact, the researchers, found that the mother's milk had no advantage at all in alleviating the pain reaction, and those given glycerine actually reacted more strongly to the pain. The researcher concluded that the artificial sweetener cocktail can be used instead of sugar.

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TEACHING PROTECTION - How do you get HIV carriers among recent Ethiopian immigrants to protect their partners so they don't contract the disease? Just giving them condoms is unlikely to be effective. Thus a team from Yale University in the US and the Health Ministry, the Hebrew University and Bar-Ilan University used a different approach, which has proved quite successful. They trained "cultural mediators" - more veteran Ethiopian immigrants who speak the newcomers language and understand their background - to give counselling.

Reporting in the August issue of Evaluation Review, the team headed by Prof. Edward Kaplan of Yale found that the number of women who got pregnant among the group of about 200 (those who were themselves HIV carriers or who were the sex partners of male carriers) due to unprotected sex was significantly smaller among those who were counselled than those who were not. Thus it seems to be a promising model for reducing HIV infections in this special group.

ME-OWW! - Although doctors have long claimed that smoking does not cause non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (a serious cancer of the lymphatic system), the cat may have been let out of the bag. Researchers at Tufts Veterinary School and the University of Massachusetts have found that cats living in homes where people smoke are more than twice as likely as other cats to acquire a deadly form of cancer known as feline lymphoma. Their first-of-its kind study was published in the August 1 issue of the American Journal of Epidemiology. The authors conclude that these findings offer a compelling reason for further study of the relationship between passive smoke and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

"It has long been believed that the major cause of feline lymphoma was feline leukemia virus," explained Dr. Antony Moore, VMSc, a veterinary oncologist and director of Tufts Oncology Program. "The results of our study clearly indicate that exposure to environmental factors such as second-hand tobacco smoke has devastating consequences for cats because it significantly increases their likelihood of contracting lymphoma." Several recent studies in humans have suggested that tobacco smokers may have an increased risk of contracting non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, while other studies have suggested that children of parents who smoke may have an increased risk of developing

lymphoma. The results, however, are often hard to prove due to the myriad of other risk factors that people face.

In sharing their living environments with humans, cats are exposed to many of the same environmental contaminants, including tobacco smoke. Exposure levels in cats kept indoors may actually be higher than those of human household members, who often spend extended periods outside. Cats may become exposed by inhaling the smoke or by ingesting it when they lick particulate matter off of their fur.

"We believe that feline exposure patterns to environmental tobacco smoke may mimic those of young children living in households where adults smoke and where the children inhale tobacco smoke or ingest particulate matter by mouthing contaminated objects," said Dr. Elizabeth Bertone, a biostatistician at the University of Massachusetts.

An epidemiologist and lead author of this study, Bertone added: "Our findings offer another reason for smokers living with pets and children to try to 'kick the habit.' Quitting smoking will not only reduce their risk of cancer, heart disease and diabetes, but may reduce the risk of cancer in their children and pets as well."

While no clear mechanism has been proposed to explain an association between active or passive smoking and the development of non-Hodgkins lymphoma in humans, the new study indicates several components of tobacco smoke may be carcinogenic to lymphoid tissue and may cause mutation in certain tissues.

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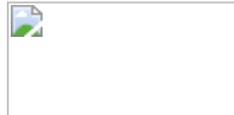
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