

Family Doctor



BY ALAN E. NOURSE, M.D. What's new in medicine & health

WATER ALERT

A warning for the growing number of hikers, campers, and backpackers this summer. According to Public Health Service and Forest Service notices, almost all lake, pond, and stream-water sources in the country must be considered contaminated for drinking purposes, unless purified before use.

Lowland lakes and streams contain ordinary colon bacilli, which may cause gastroenteritis. Highland lakes and streams, even in remote wilderness areas, may contain *Giardia lamblia*, a one-celled protozoan parasite, which can cause intestinal infection.

The best advice: Boil all collected water vigorously for 20 minutes and let it cool before using. Don't use raw iodine drops or crystals for water purification—there's too much risk of iodine poisoning. If you must depend on chemical water purification, use time-honored halazone tablets containing chlorine or tetraglycine hydroperoxide, a safe, effective iodine compound in tablet form. Both are available in drugstores with complete directions for use.

BREAST-CANCER PROGRESS

Long-range improvements in the treatment of breast cancer come slowly, but improvements *are* occurring, according to two important studies from Italy.

One study followed up on some 700 women who had small tumors at the time of surgery. It compared women who had a radical mastectomy with those who had only a partial mastectomy followed by radiation therapy. Encouragingly, the study found that the same number (about 88 percent) survived 10 years or more with less drastic surgery and radiation therapy as with the traditional radical mastectomy.

Another study involved 260 women who required chemotherapy following surgery for their cancers. It was found that cutting the course of treatment in half could produce just as good results as the longer, more distressing chemotherapy regimens ordinarily used, according to Dr. Gianni Bonnadonna of the National Tumor Institute in Milan. In either case over 60 percent of the patients survived at least seven years

after treatment, most of them without evidence of recurrence.

HERPES UPDATE

Can one acquire genital herpes simply by contact with a contaminated toilet seat? Some new reports suggest yes.

There's now evidence that some viruses, including the genital-herpes virus and the rotaviruses that can cause childhood diarrhea, may survive for at least several hours on a dry, hard surface such as a toilet seat.

It's not certain yet whether the genital-herpes virus can attack through dry, unbroken skin, but infection through any minor scratch or abrasion is distinctly possible. I've yet to see actual case reports of genital herpes transmitted this way—but to be safe, one should use toilet tissues or seat covers when using public toilets.

QUESTIONS FROM READERS

At 18 I was treated for syphilis. Now, at 27, I'm married and want a family. Could I possibly pass this old trouble on to my children?

With proper antibiotic treatment nine years ago the syphilis should have been completely eradicated from your body. The only way you could pass on the problem to your children would be if it *wasn't* completely eradicated or if you were reinfected after treatment.

There are blood tests that can help answer these questions with a high degree of accuracy and give you peace of mind. I urge that you see an obstetrician *before* you become pregnant, explain the problem without embarrassment, and have the necessary tests.

My doctor has diagnosed three cysts in my breast. I've had them six years. Should I have them removed?

The only one who could possibly give you useful advice is a doctor who has personally examined you and knows the answers (omitted from your letter) to some vital questions. How old are you? Have you ever had breast cancer? Is there a history of it in your family? Have the cysts ever been aspirated or

or biopsied? Have you ever had a mammogram taken? When? What did it show? And so on.

The proper diagnosis and treatment of a breast lump depends heavily on direct contact between doctor and patient. When a second opinion is desired, this should also involve direct contact with the second doctor.

My husband's friend is taking huge amounts of vitamin B-15. I've never heard of this vitamin. Do you have any information on it?

First of all, it isn't a vitamin. "Vitamin B-15" is a made-up name often applied to a substance called "pangamic acid," which is sometimes touted as an important nutrient.

According to the *Merck Index*, an authoritative encyclopedia of chemicals, "pangamic acid" actually has no clear chemical formula—it's a mixture of chemicals that varies from one manufacturer to the next. It doesn't qualify as a real vitamin (a substance proven to be essential to the body) and its value to nutrition remains highly controversial.

I am 22 and not overweight, but I often get very short of breath after exercise. Is something wrong? I hate to go to a doctor who will just laugh at my problem.

Let's face it: It isn't normal for a trim 22-year-old woman to become severely short of breath after a little exercise. No doctor should laugh—he should be busy finding out what's happening.

A problem of this sort could arise from your heart, your circulatory system, even from your gastrointestinal system, and it deserves investigation. Though I can't guarantee what any individual doctor's response will be, I don't think you should have much trouble finding a doctor to pay attention.

You may address questions on medical treatment or problems to Alan E. Nourse, M.D., GOOD HOUSEKEEPING, 959 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10019. Only questions chosen for use in his column will be answered.