

by David Wright

HOW CUTE IS THAT?



WE'VE ALL SEEN the images: adorable kids cuddling fluffy yellow chicks. It's the stuff of Hallmark cards and Disney cartoons. But just like *Bambi*, there's a darker side to this picture. The American Academy of Pediatrics says that baby fowl—along with other non-traditional and exotic pets, such as turtles, hamsters and hedgehogs—pose health hazards to children. Birds, reptiles and even mammals carry diseases like salmonellosis; a hedgehog's quills can penetrate skin and cause rashes. Often caught in the wild and seldom screened for diseases, some exotic pets can be territorial, and when mishandled they'll bite and scratch. Children under five are especially at risk for infections because their immune systems are still developing.

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

zoo-no-sis *noun* / (pl. **-ses**) any of various diseases which can be transmitted to humans from animals.

SOURCE: CANADIAN OXFORD DICTIONARY



Om-nivorous

BUDDHIST NUNS COULD probably teach us something about peace of mind, but they recently revealed secrets about our physical health, too. For a study into the dietary causes of osteoporosis, researchers at the University of New South Wales, Australia, recruited 105 nuns—lifelong vegans—from temples in Vietnam. Their low protein and calcium intake was expected to result in reduced bone density, but when compared with that of a group of meat-eating Vietnamese women, the difference was negligible. The study didn't measure lifestyle factors, including exercise, but the authors still consider the outcome good news for vegetarians—not to mention chickens, cows and pigs.



NEVER TOO YOUNG

WE USUALLY THINK of high cholesterol as something that afflicts people beyond middle age, but atherosclerosis (narrowing of arteries) can begin in children as young as eight. Last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a set of guidelines recommending, among other things, that overweight kids and those whose families have a history of heart disease should start having their cholesterol levels checked at the age of two.

DOCTORS ON CALL

IT'S A PARADOX that hospitals—the places we go to get well—harbour some of the most virulent microbes on the planet today. Despite years of concerted efforts to wipe them out, these “superbugs” are still on the rise. Now, researchers at Ondokuz Mayıs University in Turkey have uncovered a possible source of transmission. Almost 95 percent of the health-care workers' cellphones they tested were contaminated with bacteria, and only 10 percent of staff regularly cleaned their units. That's a message everyone should hear.

FACTOID: FIVE PERCENT OF *E. COLI* AND UP TO 20 PERCENT OF *STAPHYLOCOCCUS AUREUS* (STAPH A) INFECTIONS IN INTENSIVE-CARE-UNIT PATIENTS ARE VIRTUALLY UNTREATABLE. SOURCE: PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA



Where there's smoke...

ACCORDING TO HARVARD anthropologist Richard Wrangham, our earliest ancestors' discovery of fire and its ability to cook food was a huge evolutionary breakthrough. Intense heat makes raw meat easier to chew and digest, which in turn led to the development of smaller jaws and teeth, as well as bigger brains. Apparently, we're hard-wired to prefer processed foods, but could this be our Achilles heel? Wrangham now suggests that the cause of the current obesity epidemic is not simply overeating, but our taste for pre-softened fare, like bread, pasta and (God forbid) angel food cake.

REMEMBER PROMETHEUS? He was the Titan who stole fire from Zeus and gave it to us mortals. For his crime, Prometheus was chained to a rock and eternally condemned to have his liver eaten—raw, of course—by an eagle.



GUMS A-FLAPPIN'

DECADES AFTER fluoridated water became common in North America, childhood cavities are on the rise again. Some dentists have linked this increase to the widespread consumption of fluoride-free bottled water. Others aren't so sure. No doubt, fluoridation helps prevent tooth decay, but this is just the latest instalment in a long-running debate. When fluoridation began in the mid-20th century, many municipalities resisted the measure, calling it an infringement of individual rights. Now, there's another issue: dental fluorosis—discoloration of tooth enamel caused by excessive fluoride.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

To help prevent fluorosis, the Canadian Dental Association recommends that parents supervise young children brushing their teeth with fluoride toothpaste, allowing only a pea-sized amount on the toothbrush for kids three to six, and just a "smear" for those under three.



FITNESS Q&A

Q My teenage son recently started drinking protein supplements after his workouts, but I wonder: are they safe for developing young bodies?

A Protein is essential for muscle growth, and these supplements help athletes who can't always meet their dietary needs.

Protein powders are derived from whey, eggs and peas, and a typical serving provides 15 g to 23 g of protein. (To put this into perspective, two eggs have 14 g; a small piece of meat has 28 g.) Protein powders sometimes include glutamine and creatine (organic chemical compounds that are among the building blocks of protein). Although safe for young bodies, these additives aren't necessary—you can train just as well without them—but they shouldn't be confused with steroids, which are unsafe.

—DOUG COOK, registered dietitian, sport nutrition expert and *Toronto Star* columnist.

COOK'S PROTEIN POWDER POINTERS

- Always look for natural products that are free of sweeteners or artificial colours and flavours.
- Instead of mixing the powder with plain water, try blending it into a fresh-fruit smoothie.

Do you have a fitness question? Drop us a line and we'll find the answer: www.searsadvantage.ca/fitnesstip.