

Taking care of toddlers

It's been said with almost absolute certainty that the challenges of raising children simply become greater the older the child – from infants into adolescence and even beyond. Parenting probably becomes easier with practice. But, whether you have one child or you've managed to breed your own football team, there'll be times when knowing what to do next is pretty much guesswork.

This month Australian pharmacies which provide the Self Care health information have a special focus on children's health – specifically babies from six months onwards – just the time when they're crawling and walking and toddling into trouble. So if you're a mum or dad, or even a grandmum or granddad, you can get some good, evidence-based advice from your local pharmacist.

There are some issues about which it seems it is particularly difficult to get accurate information.

Immunisation is a case in point. With the sometimes sensationalised and misguided media stories about side effects, parents become understandably confused, concerned and apprehensive. Of course, there are adverse events associated with vaccines, but on balance the benefits far outweigh the risks.

Your "Self Care" pharmacist can give you the *Childhood Immunisation* fact card; and you'll find even more details at the Commonwealth Government website www9.health.gov.au/immhandbook. There is a table providing a brief description of the disease and statistics regarding effects and side effects of each vaccination.

To sunscreen or not to sunscreen is another dilemma presented to us as parents. As we know, primary advice for UV protection is for appropriate loose fitting clothing plus a suitable broad-brimmed or legionnaire type hat. Natural and/or man-made shade is essential during the hours around midday in Australia – other than during the winter months. However, as well, even despite babies' tender skin, a sunscreen should be applied to the necessarily exposed areas such as the face and hands. The specially formulated products for toddlers are the best ones to use.

Recently there has been considerable discussion about the risks of UV exposure in relation to skin cancer and other immune system disorders compared with the benefits of vitamin D production. Most importantly infants and toddlers should be protected from the sun. And vitamin D supplements should be considered for children of dark-skinned or veiled mothers, especially if being breast fed. Nevertheless, breast feeding is definitely best – exclusively during the first six months and for at least the next six months with solid food supplementation.

Of course, sooner or later, food is on the baby's menu. That sometimes means food allergies or food intolerance. Specific food allergy symptoms are usually experienced early on in life and are estimated to affect over 5% of children under three. Peanut allergy is the one that has hit the headlines in recent years, but other foods such as eggs, fish and cow's milk can also cause problems. Food intolerance gives rise to less spectacular symptoms. Lactose intolerance (from dairy foods) and gluten intolerance (the protein in wheat and some other grains) are among the most common. With food inevitably comes food additives; sometimes implicated in hyperactivity. But study results in this area are inconclusive. One additive about which there is strong evidence is the benefit gained by adding fluoride to water supplies. Still, there are sometimes concerns expressed about the overall safety of this important public health measure. Young children tend to receive enough fluoride to benefit their teeth through food and water; and a fluoride toothpaste is not generally recommended for children under two, as they are unable to spit it out after brushing.

You can get more tooth tips from your pharmacist with the Self Care fact cards; other titles include *Chicken Pox*, *Meningococcal Disease*, *Infant Colic* and *Nappy Rash*. Phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.