

Bar Soap?

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last month, my wife forgot her iPad at home, so I brought it to her classroom when I dropped the kids off at school. On the way to her room, I high-fived about thirty kids I knew and told them to have a great day. My wife thanked me and said she was going to have a quiet day, as half of her class was out sick with strep throat.

Shockingly, that afternoon I got severe chills and a splitting headache. I went home and straight to bed, where I stayed for the next three days. My throat swab indeed showed that I, too, had strep throat.

When I was in 4th grade, I had 10 different strains of strep throat in a 12-month period, so I had my tonsils taken out. Last month's malady ended my 30-year strep throat-free streak, which put Jerry Seinfeld's 14-year vomit-free streak to shame.

Because I'm married to a 1st grade teacher, have two elementary school age children, and practice elder law, we are well-stocked with antibacterial soap. I'm thinking about putting a bottle in my car in case I go on another grammar school high-fiving spree.

But, if an ongoing investigation conducted by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration reveals that a key ingredient in antibacterial soap is dangerous, I may have to invest in latex gloves.

Later this year, the FDA intends to release a report on the effectiveness and safety of triclosan, the germ-killing ingredient found in an estimated 75 percent of antibacterial liquid soaps and body washes sold in the U.S.

The report is hotly anticipated, as triclosan is a \$1 billion industry that includes hundreds of antibacterial products from toothpaste to toys. Consumer protection organizations, however, are eager for the report, citing recent studies that show soaps with triclosan were no more effective at preventing illness or reducing bacteria on the hands than plain soap.

They also point to studies on animals that suggest that exposure to triclosan could increase the risk of infertility and early puberty and other hormone-related problems in humans. The FDA is quick to point out, though, that animal studies "don't always predict effects in humans."

While my 30-year non-strep throat streak is impressive, the FDA has a pretty remarkable run of its own: the agency has been investigating triclosan for 40 years. In 1972, Congress passed a law requiring that the FDA establish guidelines for dozens of common antibacterial chemicals found in over-the-counter soaps and scrubs.

Because no guidelines were ever finalized, the use of triclosan is permitted. The chemical has, however, been approved for use in Colgate's Total toothpaste after Colgate-Palmolive Co. submitted data showing that the ingredient helped fight gingivitis.

Possible hormone-related problems in humans vs. \$1 billion a year industry: people will be following the FDA's triclosan report like a real soap opera.

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