



# A Kiss of Health

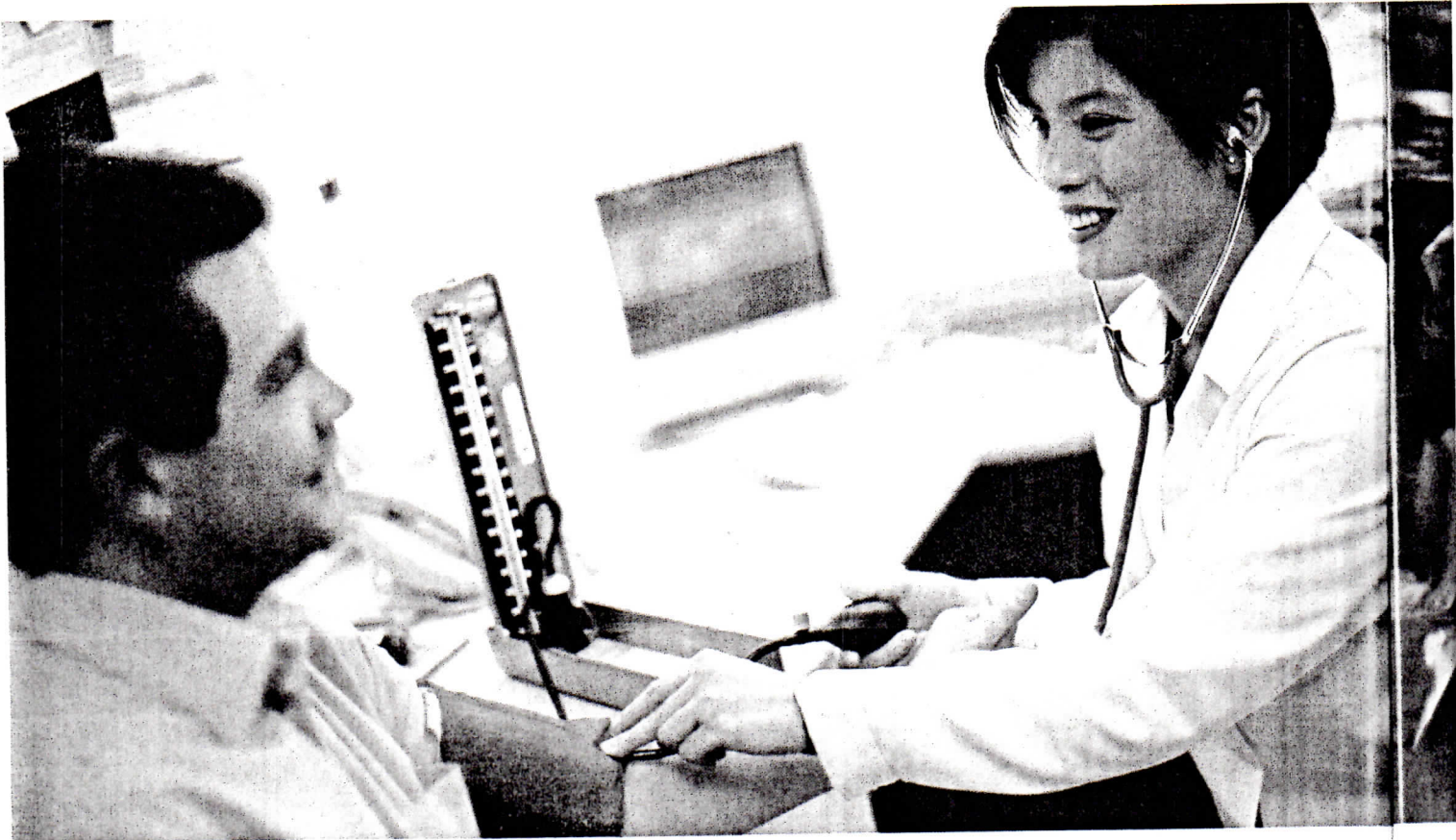
BY THEA MARIE ROOD

The irony of being a health writer is I'm a terrible hypochondriac. In *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Woody Allen gives himself a CAT scan as a birthday present, and this is me. When I was pregnant with my second child, I told my obstetrician someone should invent a portable ultrasound machine that you could take everywhere with you. Feel something funny—a cramp, a pinch, a roll—just take a peek. He thought I was kidding.

And, of course, there was the skin cancer scare—begun by an innocuous comment during a facial: "You should have that looked at." But it really can be anything: sore chest muscles from lugging my kids around (heart attack), new prescription sunglasses making me dizzy (stroke), upset stomach (poisoned by exterminator's ant spray).

**Medical experts share some simple tips for staying well.**





I'm no better with my kids. Last winter, my 4-year-old daughter had a nagging cough we couldn't get rid of. On our third visit, I sidled over to my pediatrician and whispered, "So are you suspecting some type of pulmonary disease?" When she complained of a sore neck one Sunday, I ran red lights (safely, like a cop) all the way to his office, sure it was meningitis. (It was a double ear infection.) And my 1-year-old son had an intestinal bug this summer that had me quite concerned: "Does this sound fatal or like a virus?" I asked over the phone. My pediatrician, who is so kind I don't think he's even written "NUT" on my files, said dryly, "It's more likely to be a virus than what you're imagining."

But as I enter yet another cold and flu season, I'm determined to behave in a more reasonable manner. My husband used to have a manual for his VW bus that used the

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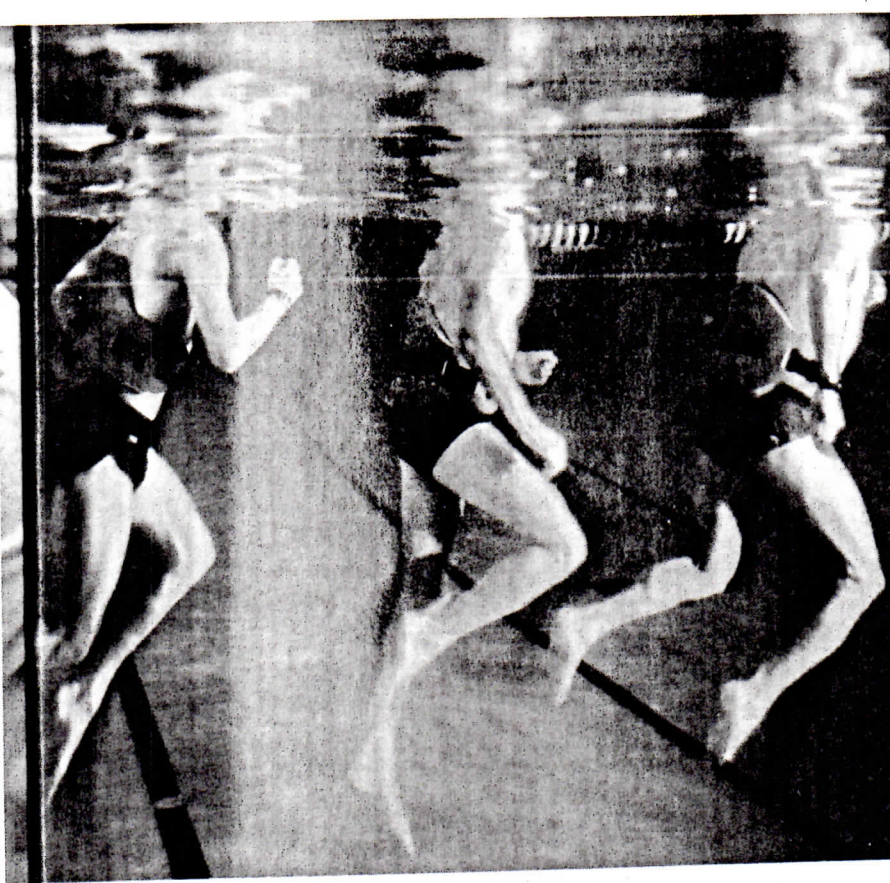
—Donald M. Hilty, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry, UC Davis

term KISS—Keep It Simple, Stupid—and this is probably good advice medically as well. Every twinge, every sneeze is probably not the beginning of a life-threatening illness. And

rather than surfing the Net looking up rare diseases, I'd be better off practicing some simple measures to keep my family healthy.

What are they, you ask, now that you, too, are looking suspiciously at that mole, rubbing that small ache in your back? Look through the next four pages to learn what local physicians and nurses say will keep us healthier and help us live longer—and birthday CAT scans don't even make the list.





## SOME SOUND ADVICE

"Take 15 minutes a day to reflect by yourself or with a loved one on the events of the day. Take the time to remember and the time to make plans to forge ahead."

—Donald M. Hilty, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry, UC Davis

"Many people believe that physical decline is an inevitable part of aging, but for the most part, that's not true. Seniors can and should improve their lifestyle behaviors by exercising and eating nutritiously to stay fit and healthy."

—George Scarmon, M.D., family practice physician, Sutter Independent Physician

"It is easier to prevent Type 2 diabetes than it is to treat it. Exercise and [eat] a sensible diet."

—Pam Prescott, M.D., diabetologist, assistant professor of endocrinology, metabolism and nutrition, UC Davis

"Don't drink and drive."

—Felix Battistella, M.D., trauma surgeon, UC Davis

## SOMETHING FATAL OR JUST A FRIENDLY VIRUS?

If you have the flu this winter, you may, in fact, believe you are dying. Aches, pains, fever, gastrointestinal upset, upper respiratory distress—it's a misery from beginning to end. But for small children, older people or people with other health problems, the flu can actually become a life-threatening deal. So what can you do? Simple: Get a flu shot.

There was some concern earlier in the season about a flu vaccine shortage, but that is no longer the case. Experts say immunizations can be given in December and beyond, so hustle the family to your doctor's office—or even the local pharmacy—for a shot of prevention.

What are the advantages? Current studies show remarkable results in children—particularly those in day care—and their families. Day care kids are considered high risk for flu,

with as many as half contracting the bug in one season. But when preschoolers and their school-age siblings were vaccinated, there was an 80 percent reduction in cases and a 70 percent decrease in school/work absences for family members, doctor visits, earaches and antibiotics prescribed. Also, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently changed its recommendations for older Americans: used to be ages 65 and older should have the shot, now the CDC says 50 and older. Some studies show cost benefits for working adults of all ages as well, in terms of missed work days and doctor visits.

## SKIN DEEP

OK, admit it, it's not enough to feel good. We want to look fabulous, too. Simple advice? "Smoking cessation and wearing sunscreens will reduce the speed of skin aging," says Thomas R. Stevenson, M.D., professor and chief, division of plastic surgery, UC Davis. "Daily sun protection is the cornerstone of good skin care," agrees Sangeeta Marwaha, M.D., dermatology, South Sacramento, Kaiser Permanente. "This can be in the form of a daily broad-spectrum sunscreen, hats and other protective clothing, and avoiding the sun during midday."

But it's not all about beauty. "Look for changes in your moles," says Gary Smith, M.D., a Sutter plastic surgeon. "The potential for skin cancer increases with aging."



"Eat a complete, nutritious breakfast."

—Ken Ashley, M.D., pediatrician, Sutter Medical Group





## WOMEN'S HEALTH

In general, women are better about seeing physicians than their male counterparts (i.e. those husbands we nag into scheduling a physical). But what are other simple things we can do to maintain our health?

- For women of childbearing age, it's important to take 400 mg of folic acid daily. Why? The March of Dimes says this is the simplest thing you can do to prevent birth defects. The rates of fetal neural tube defects—involving the brain and spine—have been reduced by as much as 50 percent in places such as South Carolina, which began a statewide campaign to increase women's intake of folic acid. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration is pushing to have folic acid added to common foods.

- Other important dietary additives? "Make sure you get enough calcium, 1 to 1.5 grams a day," says John Robbins, M.D., professor of medicine and osteoporosis expert at UC Davis.

- Also, be aware of your breast cancer risks. "Take charge of your breast health," says Sutter oncologist Kristie Bobolis, M.D. "Early detection of breast cancer is the key to a greater chance of survival and more treatment options." What does this entail? "Check with your local hospital or health center for mammography screenings, remember to do breast self-exams and request a breast exam from your doctor," says Kimberly Buss, M.D., Sutter family practitioner.

- Lastly, take good care of yourself overall. "My suggestions for women's health have to do with preventive health care: exercise, eat a healthy diet, increase calcium consumption and make sure to have screenings such as Pap smears, mammograms and sigmoidoscopy. I honestly believe the key is a healthy lifestyle," says Jeanne Conry, M.D., Ph.D., OB/Gyn, assistant physician-in-chief, North Valley, Kaiser Permanente.

- Oh, and what should you focus on when you're nagging your husband? "Men should have their prostates checked regularly, just like women have their breasts checked with mammograms regularly," says Abdo Faddoul, M.D., a Sutter urologist.

## "Nothing in excess."

—Dennis Ostrem, M.D., assistant physician-in-chief, North Valley, Kaiser Permanente

### HEARTFELT

It's true that advances in cardiac medicine include Star Treklike laser and robotic surgery techniques. But in the end, keeping your heart healthy has nothing to do with technology. It's just simple lifestyle changes that can save your life. What do the experts say?

"For health in general, let alone heart disease, exercise is key. Walking is enough. You just have to get out there and do it, building it into the daily schedule, like brushing your teeth. Don't say you don't have time for it. That's just not giving it the priority it deserves. I'm sure if everybody got regular exercise and didn't smoke, I'd be out of a job."

—Steve Rose, M.D., chief of cardiology, South Sacramento, Kaiser Permanente

"Exercise at least four times a week; vitamin E 800 units a day; one aspirin a day for everyone over age 40."

—Dennis Ostrem, M.D., assistant physician-in-chief, North Valley, Kaiser Permanente

"Get your cholesterol checked yearly, ask your doctor about hormonal replacement therapy if you are menopausal, and stop smoking."

—Amparo Villablanca, M.D., associate professor, cardiovascular medicine, director, Women's Cardiovascular Health Program, UC Davis

"Contact 1-800-NO-BUTTS ([www.quitnet.org](http://www.quitnet.org) or [www.nobutts.ucsd.edu](http://www.nobutts.ucsd.edu)) or your physician for lifesaving help on how to quit smoking."

—Bruce Leistikow, M.D., M.S., associate adjunct professor, epidemiology and preventive medicine, UC Davis

"Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is dangerous because it causes the heart to work extra hard. Have your blood pressure checked regularly to make sure you don't have this silent killer."

—Raymond Mikelionis, M.D., family practice, Sutter Independent Physician





## FOR KIDS' SAKE

- Immunize your child—and ask your doctor about new vaccines.

—Wanda M. Wenman, professor of pediatric and chief of pediatric infectious diseases, UC Davis

- Always buckle your child securely into a child safety seat. Car crashes are the No. 1 killer of children under the age of 4. For dates and times of local car seat checkups, call the Sacramento SAFE KIDS Coalition at 916-734-1588 or 1-877-543-7148.

• Never leave your child unattended around water—ponds, pools, tubs, toilets, creeks or other waterways. A child can drown in less than one minute in 1 inch of water.

- Wearing a bicycle helmet correctly could save your child's life. And for children under 18, it's the law.

• Every home should have at least one smoke detector on each floor and it is recommended you have one in every sleeping area.

- Families should have an escape plan in case of fire—where to meet and an escape route. Be sure to practice your escape with small children. They sometimes try to hide during a fire.

—Marcie Ellis, trauma prevention coordinator, Mercy San Juan Trauma Center

## BEWARE THE INTERNET

“There are over 15,000 health-oriented websites on the Internet, with false and misleading information just a click of the mouse away,” says Brock Thayer, health education manager, South Sacramento, Kaiser Permanente. “When searching the Internet for health information, look for accurate and reliable sources, such as sites provided by the government (.gov), universities (.edu), nonprofit groups and professional organizations (.org) and recognized health-care organizations (kaiserpermanente.org).”

In addition, experts suggest you remain skeptical of alarming medical news that appears on sites or comes to you in e-mails. The American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society and the CDC all have designated sections of their websites to combating current Internet myths. Examples? Here are a few—and again, all are patently untrue:

- Rumors circulated the Web warning women that using antiperspirants and wearing underwire bras had been proven to cause breast cancer. The American Cancer Society says, no way.
- People were being advised they could save themselves during a heart attack by coughing vigorously. The real advice? The American Heart Association says chew an aspirin and call 9-1-1.
- Hoaxes: HIV-infected needles placed in coin-return slots of public pay phones and movie theater seats; Costa Rican bananas linked to necrotizing fasciitis or the “flesh-eating bacteria”; and a stock clerk infected with hantavirus from handling soda cans in a storeroom. The CDC, which has the sense of humor of, say, the FBI, investigates each of these nutty claims. All are false. The CDC adds you can't get necrotizing fasciitis from a food item, but only person to person.

“Build up to 30 minutes of physical activity daily.”

—Phil Leake, M.A., CEP, clinical exercise specialist, coordinator, Mercy Preventive Health Center





## DID YOU WASH YOUR HANDS?

The CDC regularly studies Americans' hand-washing habits—primarily by observing public restrooms. This is because people lie: more than 95 percent of adults say they wash their hands after using the bathroom, for example, but only 67 percent actually do it when the CDC's hidden cameras are on.

And sorry to be sexist, but it's true: only 58 percent of men wash their hands (down from 61 percent in 1996), compared to 75 percent of women. And here's an interesting bit of trivia: men in Atlanta are the least likely to wash and women in San Francisco are the most likely. In typical CDC fashion, no theories are espoused for these differences—just the facts, ma'am.

Although you sort of want to laugh about this whole topic—red-faced adults lying to surveyors about washing their hands—experts say it's not funny. In fact, it's been suggested that better national hand-washing could lower the use of antibiotics—a concern among physicians because the more antibiotics are prescribed, the less they work.

So when should you wash your hands?

- Before and after eating
- After using the bathroom
- After contact with body fluids
- After changing diapers (wash the child's hands, too)
- After handling raw meat, poultry or fish
- After touching animals
- After blowing your nose
- After coughing or sneezing on your hands
- Before and after treating wounds and cuts
- Before and after treating a sick or injured person
- After being in a crowded space
- After handling garbage

(Source: Mayo Clinic)

## "Get regular checkups."

—Trevor Hacker, M.D.,  
associate medical director, Mercy family  
practice residency program

## THINGS YOUR MOTHER SAID THAT TURN OUT TO BE TRUE

- Be sure to eat a complete, nutritious breakfast. Breakfast gives people of all ages the energy and nutrients they need to start a new day after a good night's sleep.

—Ken Ashley, M.D., pediatrician, Sutter Medical Group

- Don't smoke. Smoking causes a myriad of health problems and diseases. Let's put it this way: you wouldn't walk into a burning building and take a deep breath, would you? Why do it with a cigarette?

- Eat whole foods. Foods such as fruits, whole grains and vegetables contain a wealth of phyto-nutrients and complex carbohydrates the body needs to function properly. This also helps lower cardiovascular, cancer and osteoporosis risk. Combine eating fruits and grains with eating less sugary and refined foods. These refined foods add calories but no healthful nutrients.

- Watch less TV!

—Phil Leake, M.A., CEP, clinical exercise specialist, coordinator of Mercy Preventive Health Center

- Laugh every day.
- Get enough sleep.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Spend quality time with your family.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- It is never too late to quit smoking.
- Get regular checkups.
- Exercise your brain—read, study, learn new skills.
- Always wear your seatbelt.
- Wash your hands.

—Trevor Hacker, M.D., associate medical director, Mercy family practice residency program