

The Perils of Peers How Social Networks Affect Your Health

Fall brings colored leaves and a new school year. From elementary school through college, the anticipation of meeting new teachers, new classmates and new friends can be an exciting, though daunting, experience. New groups of friends take shape. They can influence each other's behavior, including activities that affect their health, such as smoking, drinking and taking illegal drugs. Recently, researchers have come to understand that social groups can influence health in more subtle ways as well, in people of all ages.

Friendships and **peer** groups provide more than simple companionship. Strong friendships may become the most important relationships you have, particularly during times of stress and change.

According to Dr. Kenneth Dodge, director of the Duke Transdisciplinary Prevention Research Center, peer groups play a significant role in setting the social norms in a child's life. They help children develop good social skills. Acceptance into a peer group helps you learn to cooperate, interpret social cues, solve problems with other people, and see things from someone else's perspective.

But peer groups can have a negative impact, too. Dr. Thomas Dishion, director of research for the Child and Family Center at the University of Oregon, says, "Peer groups have the strongest influence

on attitudes and behavior, especially problem behavior."

People often call the influence of peers on one another peer pressure.



Dishion prefers to call it peer contagion, because it is more complicated than a group applying pressure to one person. The influences run back and forth between everyone in the group. It is the sum of all these interactions that affects each member. Dishion says, "It is a subtle social process, difficult to track and control."

Being part of a group affects your tendency to make your own decisions. "Some kids abstain from decision making when they are in the context of their friends; they just go with the group," Dishion says. For instance, you are less likely to stop smoking or drinking too much if those around you are doing it.

Adults aren't immune to social effects, either. A recent NIH-funded study found that adults are more likely to become obese if a close friend or family member has put on some pounds. The effect was most striking when the 2 considered each other close friends. The risk of

obesity rose by 171% after one of the friends had become obese.

"We didn't find that people who were overweight simply flocked together," explains Dr. Nicholas Christakis of Harvard Medical School, one of the study's researchers. Rather, when people became obese, those close to them seemed more likely to become obese as well.

Researchers don't understand exactly how this might work. One possibility is that norms shift within a social group when one person gains weight. Close

friends and family might then find it more acceptable to put on extra pounds. Scientists hope that future research will help them develop strategies for harnessing the power

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Definition

Peer

A person in your own age group or with similar interests.

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Wise Choices Peer Pressure Tricks

Recognizing how peer pressure works is the first step to resisting it. Some common ways our peers influence us to do things:

Rejection: Threatening to end a friendship or relationship. This pressure can be hard to resist because nobody wants to lose friends. Examples of pressure by rejection:

- *Who needs you as a friend anyway?*
- *If you don't [fill in the blank—for example, drink, smoke, take drugs] we won't hang out any more.*

Put Downs: Insulting or calling a person names to make them feel bad. Examples of put downs:

- *You're never any fun.*
- *You're such a baby.*
- *You're so uncool.*

Reasoning: Offering reasons why a person should try something or why it would be OK. Examples of pressure by reasoning are:

- *It won't hurt you.*
- *Your parents will never find out.*

Unspoken Pressure: Something you feel without anyone saying anything to you. You feel it if you want to do the same things others are doing. Some unspoken pressure tricks are:

- **The Huddle**—A group of kids stands together, with everyone talking and maybe looking at something you can't see, laughing and joking.
- **The Look**—Kids who think they're cool will give you a certain look that means, "We're cool and you're not."
- **The Example**—A group of popular kids decide to get the same backpack and you want one, too.



Web Sites

- www.thecoolspot.gov/pressures.asp
- www.family.samhsa.gov/teach
- www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/add_health_study.cfm
 - www.drugabuse.gov/NIDA_notes/NNVol18N2/Relationships.html
- <http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/headsup/support/dayinlife.pdf>

for a peer group to join, they seek other kids who are similar to them." If the common ground for the peer group is deviant behavior, it will most likely reinforce problem behaviors in the future.

But Dodge says that parents of kids and teens don't have to take a backseat in their children's choice of peer group. Parents play a unique role in developing opportunities for their children. They make decisions about where to live, where to send their children to school, what after-school activities their children attend and how much contact they have with other family members.

Dishion suggests that parents try to help their children find a positive social niche early on. It becomes more difficult to guide children into a specific niche once they've reached adolescence.

He also suggests that parents stay involved in their children's lives. Research has shown, he says, that the earlier parents stop monitoring their children, the higher their children's risk for problem behaviors.

"The most important thing parents can do is place controls over the environments their children are placed in," Dodge adds. "The exposure that kids have to other kids is determined largely by the parent. Knowledge of your children's activities and better communication between parent and child will create more favorable outcomes for your child." ■

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of social relationships to encourage healthier habits.

NIH currently funds several studies designed to examine how social factors (such as families, friends, peers, schools, neighborhoods and communities) influence teens' health and risk behaviors. Researchers hope to use this growing body of knowledge to develop strategies to encourage healthier behaviors.

One sure way to affect the health behavior of your children is to help them as they choose a social group. Though children in particular may identify with a certain peer group for a period of time, they often move from group to group.

"Which peer group children end up staying in is dependent on how readily accepted they are into the group," Dodge says. "When they are looking

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Giving Germs the Slip

Soap and Shots Can Protect Your Health

With schools back in session and cooler weather on the way, many of us will be spending more time indoors. It's a time to make holiday plans. It's a time for togetherness. And it's a time when we share a lot of disease-causing germs. Fortunately, you can take simple steps to dodge germs and boost your chances of staying healthy.

Each year, from late fall through winter, the number of cold and flu cases in the U.S. climbs dramatically. When you're sick, each cough or sneeze can propel droplets laden with **microbes** into the surrounding air. These droplets can travel as far as 3 feet. Anyone in their path may be at risk for infection. That's why covering your mouth and nose—with a tissue, the crook of your elbow or even your hand—is the considerate thing to do.

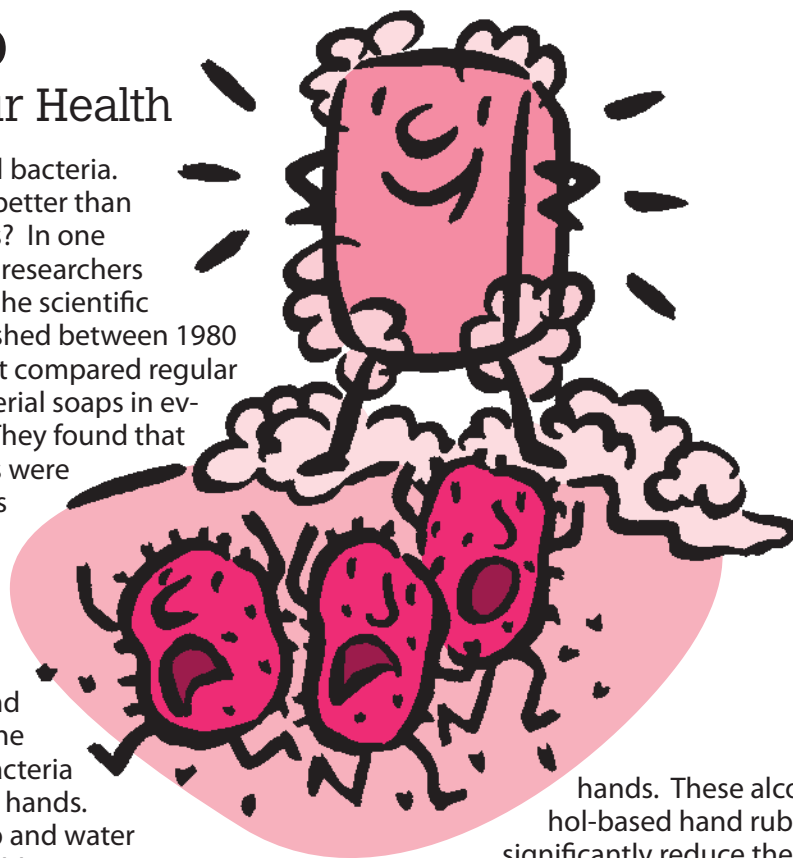
Microbes can survive outside the body, too. Some can live for 2 hours or more on doorknobs, faucets, keyboards and other surfaces. If you touch a germ-covered surface and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth, you increase your chance of getting infected and getting sick.

By far the easiest and most effective way to prevent the spread of germs is to wash your hands often and well. Health care experts recommend scrubbing your hands vigorously with soap and water for at least 15 seconds—about as long as it takes to recite the alphabet.

Antibacterial soaps are popular and plentiful on store shelves. They contain a chemical called triclosan,

which can kill bacteria. But are they better than regular soaps? In one recent study, researchers reviewed all the scientific papers published between 1980 and 2006 that compared regular and antibacterial soaps in everyday use. They found that regular soaps were as effective as antibacterial soaps, both in blocking germ-related disease symptoms and in reducing the amount of bacteria measured on hands.

When soap and water are not available, you can use an alcohol-based gel—usually called a “hand sanitizer”—to clean your



hands. These alcohol-based hand rubs significantly reduce the number of germs on skin.

Another great way to stay healthy during the cooler months is vaccination. Getting a flu vaccine each fall is the single best way to prevent the flu. Flu vaccines can be given as a shot or a nasal spray. Both provide protection against the strains of flu that experts predict are going to be the most common this winter.

Talk to your health care provider about flu vaccines and other strategies to help you beat back germs. Taking some simple steps will help you and your family stay healthy and enjoy the festivities this fall and winter. ■



Wise Choices Preventing the Spread of Germs

- Wash your hands often and well. If soap and water are not available, some health officials recommend rubbing your hands with alcohol-based gels.
- Cover your nose and mouth when you sneeze or cough.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Keep doctor-recommended vaccinations—for you and your children—up to date.
- Stay home when you are sick and check with a health care provider when needed.
- Eat right, get enough sleep and exercise regularly to help strengthen your immune system and fight sicknesses.



Web Sites

- www.niaid.nih.gov/publications/microbes.htm
- www.cdc.gov/cleanhands
- www3.niaid.nih.gov/healthscience/healthtopics/Flu
- www3.niaid.nih.gov/healthscience/healthtopics/colds



Definition

Microbes

Tiny germs—like bacteria and viruses—too small to see without a microscope. Some microbes can cause disease.

Health Capsules

Early Childhood Program Shows Benefits

A unique early education program seems to help poor children succeed later in life, a new study reports. Those who graduated from the program in 2nd or 3rd grade were more likely to later attend college and have a full-time job as young adults. They were also less likely to be on welfare or other public assistance.

The program—called Child-Parent Centers (CPC)—focused on reading, math, field trips and parent involvement. It was created in 1967 in the Chicago Public School System and is still operating with federal funding. The program provides educational and family support to low-income children between 3 and 9 years of age.

To see whether the CPCs have lasting benefits, NIH-funded scientists studied about 1,000 people who had enrolled in the program in the mid-1980s. About 93% of the children were African American, and about 7% were Hispanic. The scien-

tists compared the CPC graduates with about 500 similar children who attended different early childhood education programs.

CPC seemed to have lasting benefits, even for children who finished only part of the program. For instance, by age 24, children who attended only the pre-school program had lower rates of depression, felony arrests and incarceration than children who hadn't attended. They were also more likely to enroll in 4-year colleges and have health insurance.

"These results strongly suggest that comprehensive early education programs can have benefits well into adult life," said Dr. Duane Alexander, director of NIH's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. "A comparatively small investment early in life is associated with gains in education, economic standing, mental health and other areas." ■

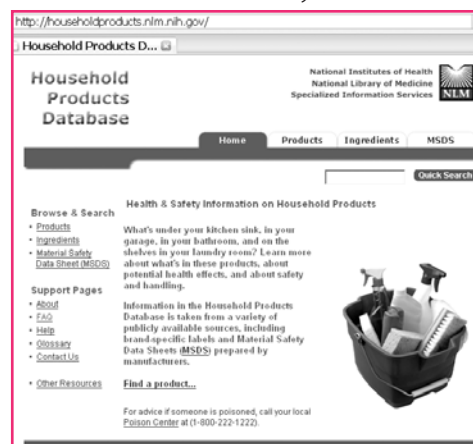


Featured Web Site Household Products Database

<http://householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov>

What's under your kitchen sink? How about your garage, bathroom and the shelves of your laundry room? Find out what's in common household products and how they might affect your health. You can also learn how to handle and use these products safely.

From NIH's National Library of Medicine.



Seeking Health Information

Where do you turn when you need general health information? According to a recent study, a growing number of Americans are looking first to the Internet. We're also getting more comfortable communicating with healthcare providers online. Over a 2-year period, the number of people who had e-mailed questions to their providers or set up appointments through a web site increased from 7% to 10%.

The findings come from the Health Information National Trends Survey, which is funded by NIH's National Cancer Institute. The survey is designed to see how people use health information and how it affects their knowledge, attitudes and behav-

ior over time. The survey began in 2003 with more than 6,300 people responding to telephone queries. More than 5,500 participated in 2005. Additional surveys will be conducted every other year.

Between 2003 and 2005, the public voiced growing confidence in health information received from doctors and other health professionals. Healthcare providers were increasingly preferred over other sources of medical information, including friends and family, printed materials and the Internet.

While we became less trusting of online health information, more of us were surfing the Internet for health information in 2005 than in

2003. The study found that younger or more educated people were more likely to search the Internet for health information.

If you're looking for health information online, start with credible sources like NIH's own health pages, which have been reviewed by NIH scientists for accuracy. ■



Web Sites

- <http://health.nih.gov>
- www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/webeval/webeval.html
- <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/webresources>



For more health information from NIH, visit

<http://health.nih.gov>