

Honey and infant botulism

One of the basic problems in researching the newly recognized phenomenon of infant botulism (SN: 5/6/78, p. 297), is that scientists have little idea how the toxin-making material enters the baby's body in the first place. A review of the 63 diagnosed cases in the United States up to now has indicated that the source is *not* contaminated food.

However, the world's largest honey-producing group revealed last week that some honey may contain botulism spores that could be dangerous to children younger than one year of age. The Sioux Honey Association of Sioux City, Iowa, said that while the honey would probably not affect older children or adults, there is a "possibility of a risk factor" in feeding "any raw agricultural product" to infants.

California state health researchers, who first recognized the disease in infants in 1976, have suggested that botulism may be one cause of sudden infant death syndrome. Stephen S. Arnon, chief investigator in the California project, commended the honey association for publicizing the potential risk, but emphasized that research is still preliminary and there is still no way to identify susceptible youngsters.

Women drinkers and sex problems

Alcoholism has been known for several years to reduce sexual potency in some males. Now a University of Utah study links sexual problems to alcoholism in females. In most such cases, however, it appears that the problems contribute to drinking, rather than vice-versa.

In a study of 44 acknowledged female alcoholics, graduate psychology student Donna Ridgeway reports that:

- Nearly 40 percent said they had been raped at some point in their life. (This compares to an estimated 10 percent for the general population.)
- Forty percent have experienced incest (compared with five percent of the general population).
- Nearly 20 percent said they have never experienced orgasm (more than double the general population figure).
- Most said they use alcohol prior to sexual activity because it helps them "relate" better to their partners.
- More than 70 percent have had extramarital affairs.
- Twenty percent reported occasional homosexual experiences since adolescence.

The surveyed women filled out the questionnaires anonymously, according to the psychologist.

The paranoid nonschizophrenic

For years, the terms paranoia and schizophrenia have formed one of the most stable marriages in the world of psychiatric labels. The two have been linked together for so long that even professionals sometimes neglect to recognize them as separate entities, according to two University of Chicago psychiatrists.

But in a study of 105 "paranoid" patients at the University of Chicago Medical Center, Robert Freedman and Paul J. Schwab found that only 32 also had schizophrenia. "True, many schizophrenics are paranoid," Freedman says. "In our series, a lot of paranoid patients, however, were actually suffering from depression. Many could be successfully treated by lithium or anti-depressants. In some cases of paranoia drugs are indicated, in some they are not."

In an area where "misdiagnosis of patients is relatively common," the two psychiatrists classified the patients they studied as follows: 37 "suspicious"; 12 with "ideas of reference ('people are talking about me; things are done just because of me')"; 56 with paranoid delusions ("people are plotting against me").

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Janet Raloff reports from the New York Academy of Sciences' International Conference on Health Hazards of Asbestos Exposure

When "asbestos diseases" are not

Mesothelioma, a cancer of membranes lining the chest and abdominal cavity, is extremely rare except among asbestos workers. In fact, whenever a larger than expected incidence of this cancer is found, asbestos is immediately held suspect. But three Turkish researchers from Hacettepe University Medical School in Ankara, reported finding asbestos-free regions in Turkey where asbestos-related diseases — such as mesothelioma, calcified pleural plaques and chronic fibrosing pleuritis — are very common. Mineral fibers of the same general size and shape as asbestos have been found, however, suggesting that it is the size and shape of inhaled fibers, not the mineral itself, that causes the diseases, according to Y. Izzettin Baris, Mustafa Artvinli and A. Altay Sahin.

S. Yazicioglu and colleagues believe that inhalation of asbestos fibers from a popular, white, house stucco is the cause of the diseases. But the Hacettepe study contradicts this. Some asbestos-free towns with high numbers of "asbestos-related diseases" also use asbestos-free stucco. And many towns with the same asbestos stucco have widely different proportions of these diseases. (Since most of the afflicted were rural peasant farmers, industrial exposures could be ruled out.)

Karain, an asbestos-free town, exemplifies the problem. In 1974, 11 of its 18 deaths (in a population of 604) were from mesothelioma. While clumps of asbestos had been found in old drinking-water wells, Baris and colleagues concluded (after conferring with British colleagues) that tumors from contaminated water were "highly improbable." Erionite, a form of zeolite, was a much more likely culprit, they said. Not only were its needle-like fibers found in local rock and soil, but also in the lung of at least one man (from another asbestos-free town) with CFP.

In the future, the Hacettepe researchers would like to see regions studied by Yazicioglu examined for erionite. They also suggest implanting fibers of inhalable-size, nonasbestos minerals into animals to confirm the "size and shape" theory.

Got any hot pipes?

Seven French researchers representing four medical and research organizations found workers in an electric-generating station had signs of asbestos-related disease, some indicating heavy exposure. One third of the 55 workers (with an average of 24 years' service) had asbestos fibers in their sputum (coughed up mucus) as opposed to only 5.6 percent in a control group of 53 autoworkers. Air samples showed asbestos fibers in the range of 0.1 to 6,000 x 10⁻⁹ grams per square meter in the power plant, virtually none in the auto plant.

The power plant was chosen for its quantity of old high-temperature pipes, which hinted that damaged asbestos insulation might be present. And unlike most studies, this one stressed looking for "early" symptoms that relate to intensity of exposure — such as recent hoarsening of the voice, chest pain and gastrointestinal symptoms — according to the team headed by A. Hirsch. (They warn that precise numbers may be skewed since respondents were volunteers.) They conclude that findings point to possible prevalent and hidden hazards in any older, post-1940s industrial plant.

Short exposures can be dangerous

A study of 92 asbestos-factory workers exposed to heavy doses of asbestos dust for just one month showed a slight but notable (doubling) increase in asbestos-related disease and lung cancer five to 35 years later, according to the American Cancer Society's Herbert Seidman and E. Cuyler Hammond and Irving Selikoff of New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

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