

Tales from the road

The past two weeks I have been traveling in South America, mostly in Argentina. One large difference that stands out between South America and my day-to-day life in the States is the different approach to hygiene. This tweaks a certain curiosity in my mind—if the cleanliness is different in this part of the world—how does this change their lifestyles?

In medical school I attended several lectures that attempted to understand allergies, asthma and similar phenomena. Allergies are a relatively new scourge to the human race—they have really only been recognized as a problem by doctors for about 100 years. Likewise, even asthma is a new problem in the grand scheme of things.

One explanation for the massive increase in allergies and asthma attributes this new problem to the changes we have made to the environment around us. Some experts believe as we are cleaning the world around us—with freshly soaped hands at all times, kitchens and bathrooms that are super-sterilized, and with foods that are handled with the most hygienic methods possible—that we do not get exposed to so many different things. The bugs and microbes and fungus and everything nasty the world has to offer us—that we would have normally been exposed to—are now gone. Our immune systems are over-revved and looking for something to do to occupy their time.

The immune system works against foreign intruders essentially like this: the body makes proteins that can recognize every possible type of intruder. When we are young, the body gets exposed to an entire world of things and learns to recognize the bad guys from the good guys—those proteins that recognize the good guys are not produced any more, and the proteins that recognize the bad guys are made in mass quantities. The body then ships these proteins out all over the body.

Allergies occur when the body thinks the good guys are bad guys. Common things, such as rag weed and pollen, are seen by the body as intruders, and the response is exaggerated beyond what the normal response should be.

One of the most commonly accepted explanations for the increase in allergies is that we are creating too clean of a world. By killing all of the microbes and parasites that used to attack our bodies, we have essentially left our immune systems with nothing else to do.

Studies have shown that kids who have grown up on farms, those kids who have a constant exposure to microbes and other so called “nasty things,” have less allergies than their counterparts who grew up in more sterile urban environments. Also, children who grow up with multiple pets in the house are less likely to have allergies, suggesting that all of the unseen nastiness that pets put into our lives is actually beneficial.

All of this is not to suggest that you put your toddler in the pig pen to play. However, as I left the grocery store this evening in Buenos Aires, I bought eggs that had never been refrigerated and meat that had never been frozen or even properly cooled. I guarantee you no one in the store had washed their hands since they arrived on the job, and not once have I seen the little clear jugs of hand sanitizer since I left the USA—other than the few bottles hanging from tourists’ backpacks.

And, after all of that, the rate of allergies is likely to be much less in Argentina than in the USA. Just a little food for thought...

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