

"active" medications had no more benefit on cough or sleep than the placebo. (*Infectious Diseases in Children*, February, 2007)

**COMMENT:** It's hard to imagine a child with a cough or cold not receiving some over-the-counter medication with one of these two ingredients, but despite their widespread use, there is great controversy over whether these medicines really work in the doses and combinations that are available. Some parents and researchers have suggested that the reason antihistamines might help is because they cause sleepiness, and it is this feature, not their anti-cough effects, that give children an improved night's sleep. On the other hand, Dr. Berlin's group didn't find any benefits for either cough or sleep, and instead recommend that children with coughs and colds be treated with nasal saline (saltwater) sprays, good hydration, and either acetaminophen or ibuprofen (for fever or pain).

Whether or not cough/cold medicines benefit children, there's clear evidence that they may pose some serious risks in the youngest children, those under 2 years of age. Readers may recall a recent warning from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and the FDA that accidental overdoses or complications from such medicines led to many emergency room visits for children under 2 and even three deaths in children 6 months of age or younger (*CHILD HEALTH ALERT*, February, 2007, p. 1-2).

It's worth repeating the advice offered by federal health experts who reported those risks: "Because of the risks for toxicity, absence of dosing recommendations, and limited published evidence of effectiveness of the medications in children less than 2 years, parents and other caregivers should not administer cough and cold medications to children in this age group without first consulting a health-care provider and should follow the provider's instructions precisely." **CHA**



## ASTHMA/ALLERGIES

### Probiotics May Pose Risk In Children With Cow's Milk Allergy

Cow's milk allergy is one of the most common food allergies in infants. Though most children outgrow it by the age of 5 years, cow's milk allergy can persist in some children. (Cow's milk allergy, which can be very serious, should not be confused with lactose intolerance, a much less serious condition where milk products are poorly digested and lead to gas, cramping, and diarrhea). Probiotics, which include "good" bacteria and yeasts, have been shown to have a number of health benefits, possibly including improving certain allergic conditions such as eczema. It's also been suggested that probiotics could be helpful in eczema that is associated with food allergy.

However, researchers in France recently reported an infant with cow's milk allergy who had a severe

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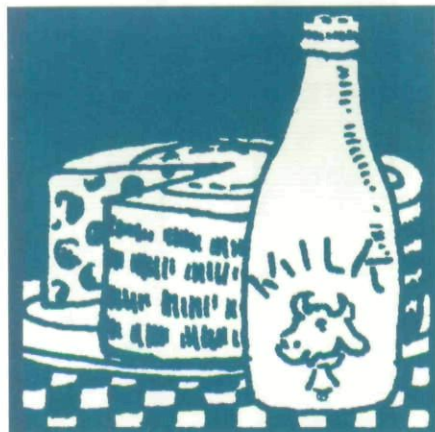
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Address all correspondence to Child Health Alert, P.O. Box 610228, Newton Highlands, MA 02461 USA  
Telephone: 781-239-1762 Fax: 781-431-7606

E-mail: [alertsrus@comcast.net](mailto:alertsrus@comcast.net)  
Website: [www.childhealthalert.com](http://www.childhealthalert.com)

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allergic reaction after ingesting a probiotic preparation; the probiotic was found to have small amounts of cow's milk in it. This experience led the researchers to wonder if commonly used probiotics might contain cow milk allergens of various kinds, so they tested a number of products. They found that some did contain small amounts of these allergens and some had none. Since they only tested one batch of each brand, the authors couldn't tell whether their findings would be true for all batches or different brands. The allergens get into the probiotic preparations because they are grown in cultures containing milk products, and the authors urge manufacturers to make sure that their production procedures effectively eliminate food



allergens from probiotic culture material. (Lee T-T et al: *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, March, 2007, page 746-747)

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**COMMENT:** The authors point out that there may be variation in allergen levels in different batches of different products, but they tested products available in France, so we cannot even guess what the situation may be for U.S. products. For the vast majority of children who might take probiotics of various kinds, this report has little importance. For the few children with serious or life-threatening cow's milk allergy, however, it's useful to know that probiotic preparations might contain small amounts of various milk allergens. **CHA**



## CHILD DEVELOPMENT

### An Unexpected Effect Of The Autism-Vaccine Controversy

Almost 10 years ago, a researcher in England created a major controversy when he and his colleagues published a report linking the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine to the development of autism in children. Since then, there's been a great deal of research focused in three general areas: First, many scientists tried to see if there was indeed a connection between getting the MMR vaccine and developing autism, but they consistently failed to find such a connection. Second, other research showed that the controversy directly led many parents to refuse to have their children vaccinated. Third, public health officials found that reduced use of vaccines led to increases in the diseases those vaccines would have prevented. However, one area of research that has received little attention is what kind of impact the controversy has had on parents whose children developed autism.

In a recent study funded by the British equivalent of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, researchers

interviewed 38 parents whose children had been given the diagnosis of autism after the initial controversial paper was published. Many parents had been affected by the controversy, reporting they felt inadequate, that they had let their children down, and that they blamed themselves for their child's condition. While most of the parents thought the MMR vaccine had contributed to their child's autism, even those who didn't said the controversy had been upsetting to them.

One expert, commenting on the study findings, said: "This valuable piece of research shows that the flawed research had more victims than just those who went unvaccinated. It clearly had a bad impact on parents already carrying a significant care burden. This gives further reasons why scientists should avoid making sensationalist claims or unfounded conclusions about uncorroborated research findings and why medical journals need to improve their checks on such work." (Kmietowicz A: *British Medical Journal*, April 7, 2007, p. 715)

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**COMMENT:** The MMR vaccine-autism story is a sad and complicated example of over-zealous scientists making unfounded claims based on terribly flawed data (in fact, most of the authors of the original paper have since admitted their work was flawed and have withdrawn their conclusions!). While there's been a lot of discussion about how this

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