A simple guide to healthy living in a germy world

An **'Interactive Guide'** that explains our current understanding of the so-called Hygiene Hypothesis, how and why reduced interaction with our microbial world is linked to rising levels of allergies and other chronic inflammatory diseases.

The guide also looks at how we can develop hygiene habits which will protect us against infectious diseases whilst at the same time maintaining exposure to the microbes which are important for our health.

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This resource has been produced by the International Scientific Forum on Home Hygiene (IFH).

The International Scientific Forum on Home Hygiene (www.ifh-homehygiene.org) is a not for profit, non-governmental organisation which was established in 1997 to meet the need for an independent body who could develop and promote a science-based approach to hygiene in home and everyday life settings as a means to recue the global burden of infectious diseases.

The resource can be viewed online at:
http://www.ifh-homehygiene.org/books/simple-guide-healthy-living-germy-world

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Introduction

What is this guide about?

This guide sets out to explain current understanding of the relationship between the rise in allergies and other inflammatory diseases, modern lifestyles, our interaction with our microbial world, and the need to protect against infectious diseases. It also examines the measures being developed to tackle these issues.

This guide explains the basic facts in easy to understand language.

Who is this guide for?

The guide is helpful for anyone wanting to know more about the ideas around 'being to clean for our own good' and the need to protect ourselves from infection.

It may be particularly helpful to:

- ✓ community health workers (nurses, health visitors)
- ✓ general practitioners, pharmacists
- ✓ public health specialists
- ✓ health policy makers
- ✓ the professional and consumer media
- ✓ school teachers
- ✓ upper secondary school pupils

What is the fundamental question?

"How can we develop lifestyles, together with health policies, which reconnect us with the necessary microbial exposures, whilst also protecting against infectious diseases?"

Introduction

The rise in Chronic Inflammatory Disease

In recent years there has been a massive rise in allergic and other Chronic Inflammatory Diseases.

The rise has been particularly great in the urban centres of Western society.

Why has this happened?

No single cause has been identified, but it is becoming clear that microbial exposure is a fundamental underlying factor.

Exposure, particularly in early life, to the diverse range of microbes that inhabit our natural, and our human and animal environments (usually referred to as the microbiome) is important for building and sustaining an immune system which is properly regulated.

Without regulation the system can overreact, or react inappropriately to allergens like pollen (causing allergies) or our own tissues (causing autoimmune diseases).

What about infectious diseases?

Since the microbial exposures we require are largely non harmful, we need to discover how we can reconnect with our microbial world without increasing our exposure to infection.

What are Chronic Inflammatory Diseases?

Allergic diseases such as:

- Asthma
- Hay fever
- Eczema

and diseases such as

- Multiple Sclerosis (MS)
- Type 1 Diabetes (T1D)

Our Opinion

Whilst new knowledge suggests we need to reconnect with our microbial world, the idea that we should be less “hygienic” is wrong.

Relaxing standards of “hygiene” would not reverse the trend, it would only serve to increase the risks of infectious disease.

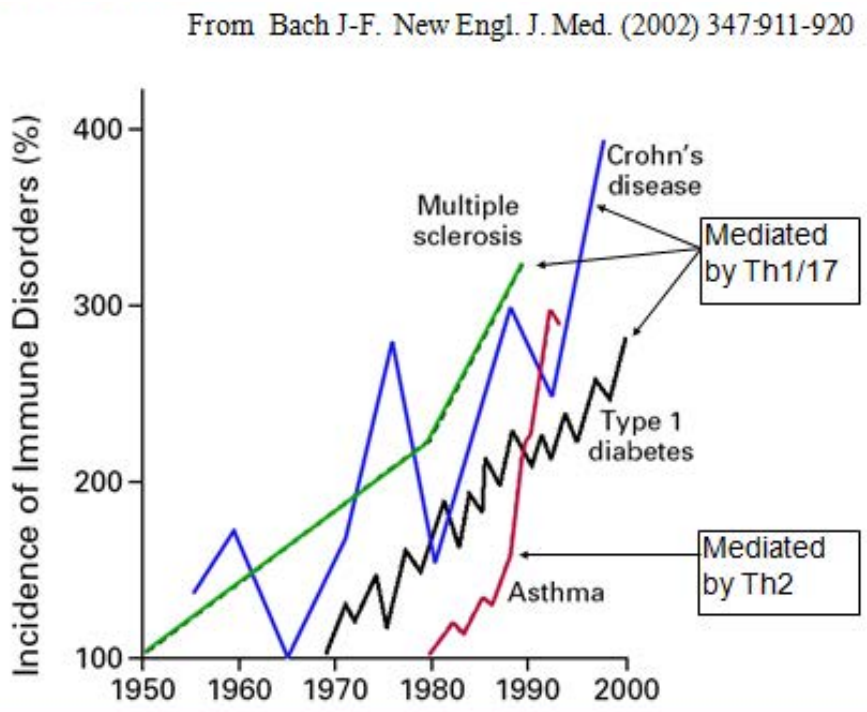
What do we know about the rise in inflammatory diseases?

In the last century, diseases caused by overreaction of the immune system have increased steadily, particularly from around the 1970's onwards. This has been especially the case for industrialised societies.

Allergies now affect as much as 50% of the industrialised human population.

Auto-immune diseases such as Type 1 Diabetes and Multiple Sclerosis (where the immune system reacts against the body's own tissues) and other diseases involving inappropriate immune responses (e.g Crohn's Disease) are prevalent in at least 10% of industrialised populations.

Although many different factors play a role, it is becoming clear that exposure to microbes has a vital part to play.



Did you know?

In the early 1900s, hayfever was so rare that doctors struggled to find cases to study.

It is estimated that 10 million people in the UK now suffer from hay fever.

How does microbial exposure protect us from allergies and other chronic inflammatory diseases?

The link between microbial exposure and immune diseases

The concept of a link between reduced microbial exposure and the rise in allergic disease was first proposed by David Strachan in 1989 and was named the Hygiene Hypothesis.

Although the basic concept still appears to be correct, the proposal of a link to infectious disease and hygiene is now largely discounted. Refinements to the original hypothesis now offer a more plausible explanation.

The Hygiene Hypothesis has been variously renamed as:

The Old Friends Mechanism

Microbiome Depletion Hypothesis

Microbial Diversity Hypothesis

The Old Friends (OF) Mechanism

The Old Friends of Mechanism was proposed by Graham Rook in 2003.

He proposed that the required microbial exposures are not infectious diseases (colds, flu, measles, norovirus etc) which evolved only over the last 10,000 years, but the microbes we co-evolved with in hunter gatherer times when the human immune system was developing.

Although these microbes are still there, through modern lifestyle changes we have lost our exposure to them.

To learn more about the Old Friends of mechanism go to page 40.

Evolved dependency on microbial exposure

Our immune systems have become so dependent on these exposures that they cannot function properly without them.

Who are our Old Friends?

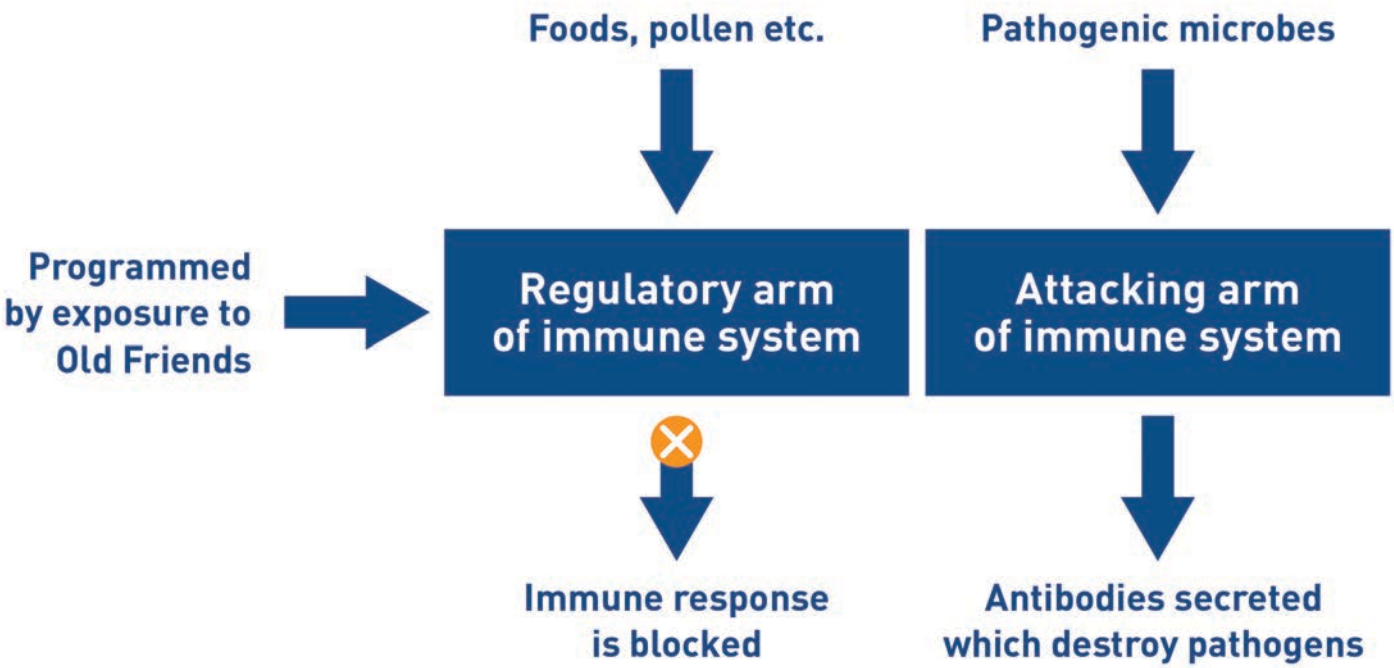
Rook hypothesizes that the immune system has evolved to require input from at least three sources collectively called the Old Friends:

Commensal microbiota: diverse range of species found on normal skin, gut, airways, urogenitary tract, etc	Transmitted by mothers and other family members
Environmental microbiota: diverse range of species found on animals, soil, air, plants	Spp. which inhabit our indoor and outdoor environments
Old Infections: Helminths Salmonella, HAV, *H. Pylori etc*	Cause chronic infections - have to be tolerated, attempts to eliminate cause tissue-damage

How do our Old Friends protect us from allergies

The main function of our immune system is to fight infectious diseases caused by harmful (pathogenic) strains of bacteria, viruses, fungi and protozoa. If infected, specific proteins (called antigens) on the surface of the pathogen trigger an immune response, involving secretion of antibodies that match the antigen and neutralize and destroy the pathogen. The problem is that foods, pollen etc also have antigenic properties – even though they are harmless. To deal with this, the immune system has a “regulatory arm” which is programmed to recognize non-harmful agents and ensure they are not attacked.

To do this the immune system, like a computer, must be programmed with data enabling it to distinguish antigens of harmful microbes from antigens that need to be ignored. Programming occurs particularly in early life, by ongoing exposure to Old Friends microbes. If we are not sufficiently ”programmed”, the immune system may fail to recognise food or pollen as harmless and attack it. It is this “attack” which triggers the allergic symptoms that we experience.



Further Reading

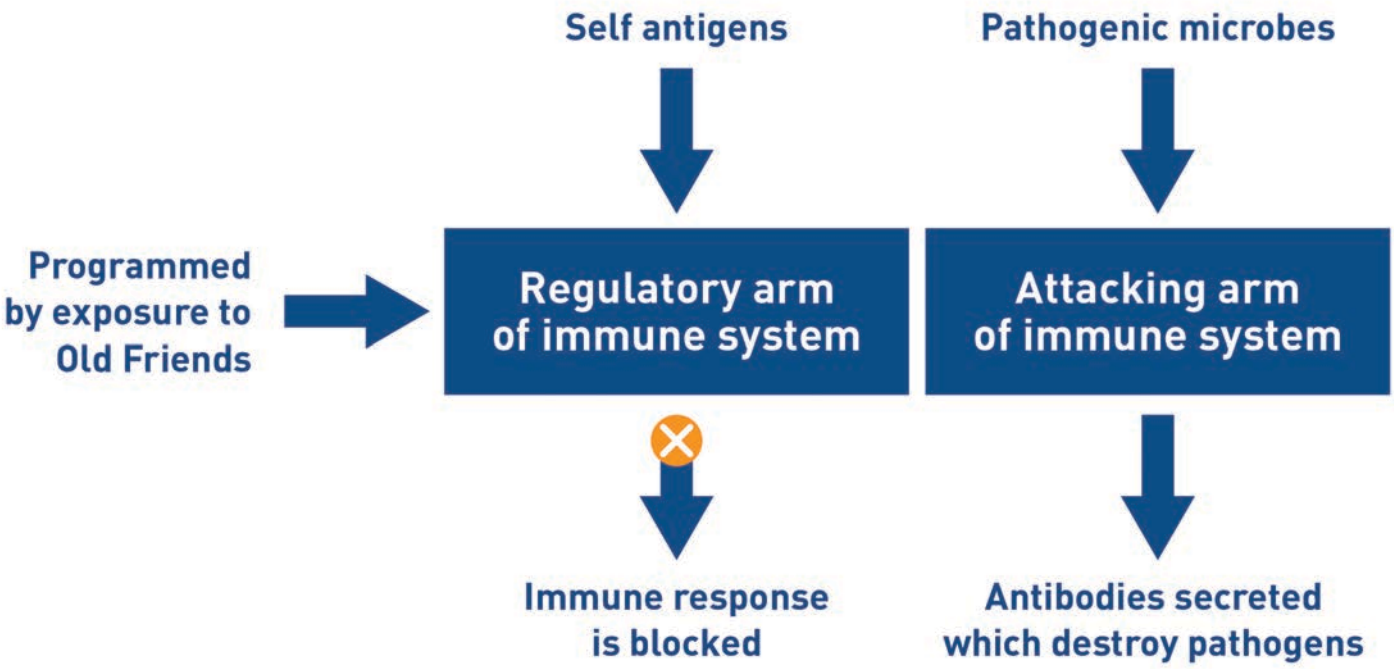
To read more about the immune system go to page 36

How does microbial exposure protect us from other chronic inflammatory diseases?

As with foods and pollen, our own body cells also bear antigens (known as self antigens).

A further function of the regulatory arm of the immune system is to recognize self antigens and ensure that they are not attacked. To do this the immune system must be programmed with data, enabling it to recognize self antigens and ensure that they are not attacked.

If we are not sufficiently ”programmed”, by ongoing exposure to Old Friends microbes, the immune system may fail to recognise self antigens as harmless and attack them. It is this “attack” which triggers autoimmune diseases such as Multiple Sclerosis, Inflammatory Bowel Disorder etc.



Further Reading

To read more about the immune system go to page 36

The importance of microbial diversity

It is thought that:

- Our microbial exposure needs are not confined to a single OF species.
- Exposure to a diverse range of species is a requirement.
- This may mean that our exposure needs can be met by one or more of a diverse range of microbes which make up the human and environmental microbiome.
- If any species is missing, their role may be met by others.

What is the route of microbial exposure?

Based on current evidence, the oral and respiratory routes seems the most likely candidate, which fits with the OF mechanism.

However, findings do not rule out other routes including inhalation, which is very effective in animal models, or even transdermal exposure.

Possibly all of these routes are involved.

Does exposure need to be maintained during adult life?

Evidence suggests that **the most important time of exposure is during pregnancy, and during the first hours, days or months of life.**

Evidence suggests that exposure needs to be maintained for a significant period e.g. Breastfeeding for 6 months.

There is some evidence that on-going exposure may be important.

More research is needed. Most of our understanding comes from studies with infants.

Swedish Study

A 2008 Swedish study showed that reduced diversity of faecal microbiota in infants at one week was associated with higher rates of eczema at 18 months.

Danish Study

A 2011 Danish study showed that increased risk of allergic disease was associated with less gut microbiota diversity in infancy.

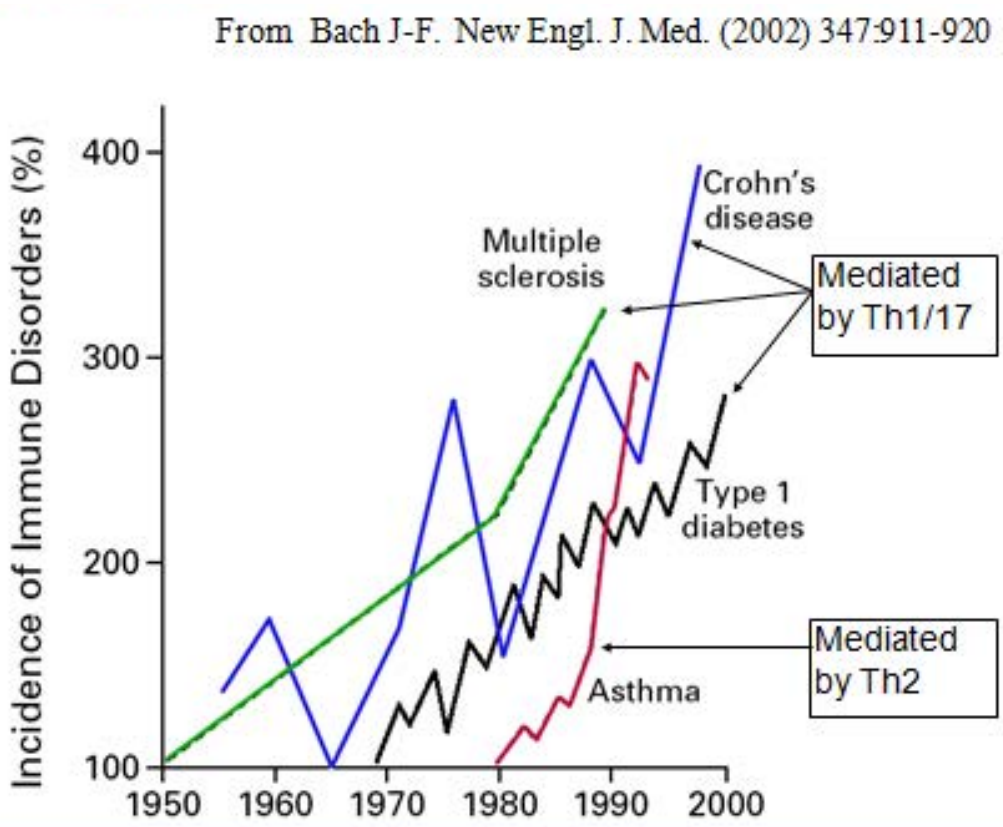
Oral Treatment

A 2007 study showed that, when adults with established Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) or Multiple Sclerosis (MS) took part in trials involving oral treatment with helminth (worms) eggs, significant improvement of symptoms was seen.

It has been shown that naturally-occurring helminth infection can delay progression of established early MS.

What lifestyle and other changes have caused the problem?

- Allergies/CIDs existed prior to 1800s – but are largely diseases of last 100 -200 years
- Accumulated data suggests
  - increasing levels from the late 19th century
  - rapid rise from the 1970s
- What has changed in past 2 centuries to deprive us of requisite microbial exposure?
- It seems likely that not one – but all of the following factors are involved:

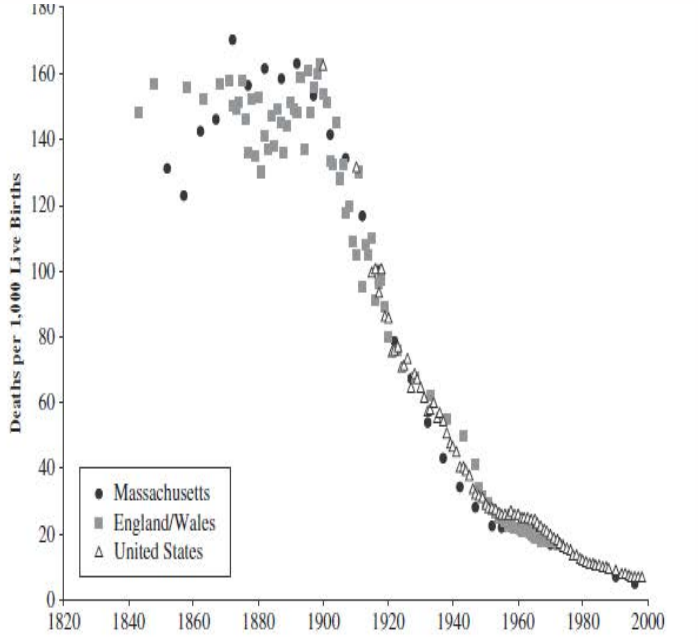


The Sanitary Revolution

The obvious answer is the sanitary revolution of past 200 years.

Improved water quality and sanitation:

- occurred gradually from 1800s, but widespread coverage (toilets, treated water, etc) did not occur until late 19th into C20th.
- environmental clean-up from 1850s - reduced exposure to human waste and animal excreta in city streets.



The Health Revolution: Decline in Infant Mortality. Massachusetts: U.S. Bureau of
istics of the United States Colonial Times to 1970, National Center for Health Statistics, *Health*

Rapid decline in mortality 1900 - 1950 particularly young children.

Decline in Cholera, Typhoid, TB, Diphtheria and common childhood infections.

The link to the sanitary revolution may be correct, but, if the OF mechanism is also correct, the likely explanation is these changes have also inadvertently reduced exposure to our Old Friends which occupy the same habitats.

Dietary changes and microbial content of diet

Modern western diets have been shown to exert profound effects on human gut microbiota.

Whilst **microbiological quality of food has improved -** e.g. eliminating harmful organisms - at the same time we have inadvertently also eliminated Old Friends microbes from our food.

Changes in our dietary habits e.g. (consumption of animal fat versus carbohydrates) have led to changes in types and balance of microbes in our gut.

Child birth, breastfeeding and social contact

Caesarean delivery has been linked to a greater tendency to develop allergic disorders, leading to suggestions that transfer from the bacterial microbiota of the birth canal, in addition to greater exposure to faecal organisms, during **natural childbirth** is important in the early colonisation of the baby's gut.

Data consistently shows that **children from large families** are at lower risk of allergies; larger families give more opportunity for sharing gut, skin and respiratory microbiota, for instance by close contact.

Can breastfeeding help?

Studies have shown that **breastfeeding for 6 months** or more is protective against allergies.

Exposure to the natural environment

Reduced exposure to important microbial species has also occurred because **of reduced contact with our outdoor environment** and the huge diversity of microbial and helminth (worms) species which it contains. Urbanisation has accelerated loss of exposure to the natural environment. We now spend up to 80% of our time indoors.

Studies show:

Studies consistently show that exposure to a farm environment in early life can protect from asthma. The composition of the human commensal microbiota depends on input from the natural environment.

Studies in Finland show the skin microbiome from individuals living close to agricultural land was more diverse than from those living close to urban centres and was associated with reduced atopic sensitisation.

Could antibiotics be involved?

Antibiotic usage shows a good temporal fit

- ✓ Increasing antibiotic use since 1950s
- ✓ Steep rise in allergies from 1970s

Epidemiological studies show antibiotics may be a risk factor for allergies, particularly excessive use by pregnant mothers or young babies.

- ✓ Evidence of a link for asthma, cow's milk allergy, IBD, eczema

Antibiotics may alter our interaction with microbes leading to reduced diversity of human gut microbiota.

Tests show

Although there is concern about possible confounding of epidemiological studies, studies with humans and mouse models now support this concept.

They show mechanisms by which reduced microbiota diversity can be associated with development of inflammatory disease.

Are we too clean for our own good?

What are the origins of this idea?

In proposing the Hygiene Hypothesis, Strachan suggested that lower incidence of childhood infections could explain the 20th century rise in allergies. This was based on studies showing that larger family size appeared to protect against hay fever.

Strachan suggested that smaller families provided insufficient microbial exposure because of less person to person spread of infection – but also because of *"improved household amenities and higher standards of personal cleanliness".*

From this the notion that "we have become too clean for our own good" has arisen.

Respiratory infections can actually increase allergy risks

There is now evidence that childhood infections, far from protecting, actually increase the risk of allergies.

Experts agree

Most experts now agree that the "hygiene" hypothesis is a misnomer.

Whilst the link between microbial exposure and inflammatory disease is most probably correct, the idea that children who have more infections are less likely to develop allergies is now largely discounted.

This means that allergies are not the price we have to pay for freedom from infectious diseases.

What is the reality?

Home and personal cleanliness

If home and personal cleanliness contributes per se, its role is likely to be small, relative to the other factors.

A key point may be that the microbial content of modern homes has altered because mostly our homes now interact with urban environments. These lack the diverse range of microbes found in rural environments and are populated by people with different and less diverse human microbiota.

This means we now interact with an altogether different and less diverse mix of microbes relative to earlier generations which were largely rural.

Research shows:

Even the cleanest looking homes are full of bacteria, viruses, fungi, etc.

Routine weekly cleaning has no sustained effect on microbe levels.

We cannot create a “sterile” home - microbes are constantly replaced via dust, air, body flora, pets, contaminated foods etc.

Helminths (worm) infections are now relatively rare in UK - up to 1950’s, 50% of children were infested with pinworm.

What about personal cleanliness?

The entire skin surface has about one million resident bacteria per cm2; numbers vary from 1,000 per cm2 on forearms to millions per cm2 on underarms.

Our habit of bathing/showering, shampooing have increased since 1940s and 50s. Bathing and showering removes many microbes from skin but are rapidly replaced.

Whether, or to what extent, skin microbiota might contribute to the OF mechanism has not yet been studied.

“

In his early proposition Strachan suggested that, “higher standards of personal cleanliness” could also be an underlying cause of reduced microbe exposure.

Does cleanliness matter?

What is often forgotten is the relationship between household or personal cleanliness and development of allergies has never been properly investigated or established.

2002 Study of personal cleanliness

An analysis of data from the UK ALSPC cohort study of children born in 1991/2 showed association between parent-reported frequency of hand and face washing, showering and bathing at 15 months and wheezing and eczema at 30-42 months, but this has not been confirmed in other studies.

From the first study, published in 2015, to directly evaluate this issue, Erika von Mutius, a highly respected researcher in this field, concluded – No. “Development of allergies and asthma is not related to cleaning activities”.

2015 Study of home and personal cleanliness

von Mutius and colleagues studied a group of 399 families. The study showed:

- Bacterial exposure in house dust was associated with reduced risk of childhood asthma and allergies
- Personal cleanliness, such as washing hands and home cleanliness were objectively reflected by dust parameters in homes

However, neither personal nor home cleanliness were associated with protection from asthma and allergies.

Is microbial exposure the only factor involved?

It is now clear that for any individual, the risk of developing CID depends on many other factors - in addition to microbial exposure.

These include diet (including vitamin D deficiency), pollution, climate change, less physical activity, obesity, socioeconomic factors and stress.

All of these can amplify the immunoregulatory deficit resulting from the changes to our human and microbial environment.

Genetic predisposition is also a risk factor.

Why don't we all suffer from allergies etc?

This may explain why we do not all suffer from these diseases. It is likely that we all still get some of the microbe exposure we need.

Whereas for some people this is sufficient, for others it is not.

In these individuals, allergies and other Chronic Inflammatory Diseases (CIDs) may be triggered, when one or more of the other factors cause further dysregulation of the immune system.

How can we reverse the trends in Chronic Inflammatory Diseases?

Therapeutic approaches are being investigated, but are as yet at an early stage.

Using probiotics (drinks or foods) to restore exposure depends on identifying the right microbes.

Lifestyle changes which could increase microbial exposure include:

- ✓ encouraging natural childbirth
- ✓ sustained breast feeding
- ✓ more physical interaction between siblings
- ✓ more sport and other outdoor activities.

Public Health considerations

Relaxing standards of water, sanitation and hygiene have no guarantee of success and would only serve to increase infectious disease risks.

Encouraging us to abandon cleanliness and hygiene is not the answer to restoring our microbial exposure needs.

Future prospects

With so many factors involved, a single “breakthrough” solution is unlikely. Success will be a slow process, using emerging data to try out new forms of treatment or lifestyle change strategies.

Why is hygiene still so important?

At the turn of the C19th, people still lived in constant fear of killer infectious diseases. Hygiene was recognised as vital to reducing risks.

Around the 1950's, access to antibiotics and vaccines, clean food and water, toilets and sanitation lulled people into believing that infectious diseases were no longer a real threat. Attitudes to hygiene became more relaxed.

The idea, prevalent at the time, that infectious disease would soon become a thing of the past, no longer holds.

With rising concern about antibiotic resistance, emerging pathogens etc, we now realise that hygiene is still a cornerstone in the fight against infection in a crowded and mobile world.

Infectious diseases circulating in the community continue to take a heavy toll on health and healthcare systems.

Hygiene is an important contributor to global sustainable health.

Food-related, waterborne, and non-food-related intestinal diseases

remain at unacceptable levels, despite the fact that food borne infections are largely controllable through good food and kitchen hygiene. WHO estimate that about 31% of reported food-borne outbreaks occur in private homes.

Respiratory infections remain common:

A German study of 1,314 children recorded an average of 21.9 respiratory infections by the age of 12 years, with up to 11 episodes a year. **Good respiratory hygiene** can limit spread of respiratory infections, most particularly colds, but also influenza.

Salmonella
is estimated to cause around 38,000 cases in the UK/year.

Campylobacter
this number is 600,000.

Norovirus
affects an estimated 3 million in the UK and 20 million in the US: the majority of cases are spread from person to person via aerosols, hands and surfaces.

Emerging infections

New pathogens (including antimicrobial resistant strains) are continually emerging. As soon as we get one under control another emerges.

Emerging infections in recent years include new agents/strains:

- ✓ SARS, Influenza, avian flu
- ✓ E.coli O104
- ✓ Ebola
- ✓ Covid???

In response to the threat of emerging pandemic strains such as influenza, hygiene is now seen as an important first line of defence to contain the disease before vaccines or treatments become available.

Did you know?

Prior to the 1980s organisms such as Campylobacter, E. coli O157, legionella and norovirus were largely unheard of.

We live in an increasingly crowded and mobile world where new infectious agents and antibiotic resistant strains spread easily and quickly.

ID risk in the community is increasing

- ✓ The proportion of “at risk” people with reduced immunity to infection, is currently estimated at around 20% in the European community and US, and is likely to increase.
- ✓ It includes many who are otherwise considered healthy – the elderly (over 65), the very young, pregnant mothers etc.
- ✓ It also includes those with underlying disease: e.g. HIV/AIDS, diabetes.
- ✓ Hygiene needs do not differ significantly from those which apply to healthy people; it is just that the risks of infection from poor hygiene are greater for “at risk” groups.

At risk groups

In the UK, at risk groups living at home and in the community includes the 300,000+ diagnosed annually with cancer and 91,000+ living with HIV.

But it is the elderly that make up the largest numbers of the “at higher risk” population.

Home Healthcare

Increasingly healthcare is being delivered at home and in the community. This arises from e.g.

- ✓ shorter hospital stays
- ✓ home-based treatments such as chemotherapy, dialysis etc.

Much of this healthcare is delivered by family members who thus require a good understanding of hygiene.

This includes protection from intestinal and respiratory infections (i.e food hygiene and respiratory hygiene), as well as protection from infections associated with their particular condition.

Government policy

Governments are now emphasising infection prevention as a means to reduce health spending.

Increased homecare is a favoured approach, but gains are likely to be undermined by inadequate infection control at home.

Antibiotic resistance

Tackling antibiotic resistance is a global priority which involves home and community, as well as hospitals. Hygiene is now seen as a central strategy to reducing antibiotic resistance.

Firstly, by reducing the burden of infectious diseases, hygiene can reduce the need for antibiotic prescribing, which is the major underlying contributor to antibiotic resistance.

Secondly, infection control measures are important to reduce spread of antibiotic resistant infections in the community.

Thirdly, as persistent nasal, gut or skin carriage of resistant strains increase in the healthy population, the risk of resistant infections in both hospital and community increases.

Prevalence of antibiotic resistant strains

A 2012 UK study of 732 healthy people in the community showed that 11.2% were carrying antibiotic resistant ESBL strains in their stools.

A significant proportion of healthcare infections are “self infections” from our own body flora.

A Call for Action

Taken together these issues indicate a need for greater investment in prevention strategies such as vaccination programmes and hygiene, which are now seen as the most sustainable approaches to containing the burden of infectious disease.

Until now the emphasis has been on prevention of infections in hospitals. Healthcare workers increasingly recognise that reducing infection in healthcare settings cannot be achieved without also reducing the circulation of pathogens such as norovirus, MRSA etc. in the community.

As infection control in healthcare settings improves, hygiene in home and everyday life settings is being exposed as the weak link in the chain?

Developing the right sort of hygiene

Two fundamental questions now need to be answered:

"How can we develop an approach to hygiene, which reconnects us with the necessary microbial exposures, whilst also protecting us against infectious diseases?"

The answer is to promote "Targeted Hygiene".

How do we change public understanding about the difference between "cleanliness" (absence of visible dirt) and "hygiene" (protecting against infectious diseases)?

This is a real challenge.

What is Targeted Hygiene?

Since 1997, IFH has been developing an approach to hygiene which has come to be known as Targeted Hygiene.

Targeted Hygiene is a holistic approach which focuses hygiene practices at the times when harmful microbes are most likely to spread, in order to break the chain of infection.

Targeted Hygiene is a framework that works to reduce spread of all types of infection, including food borne and other intestinal infections, respiratory infections, skin infections etc.

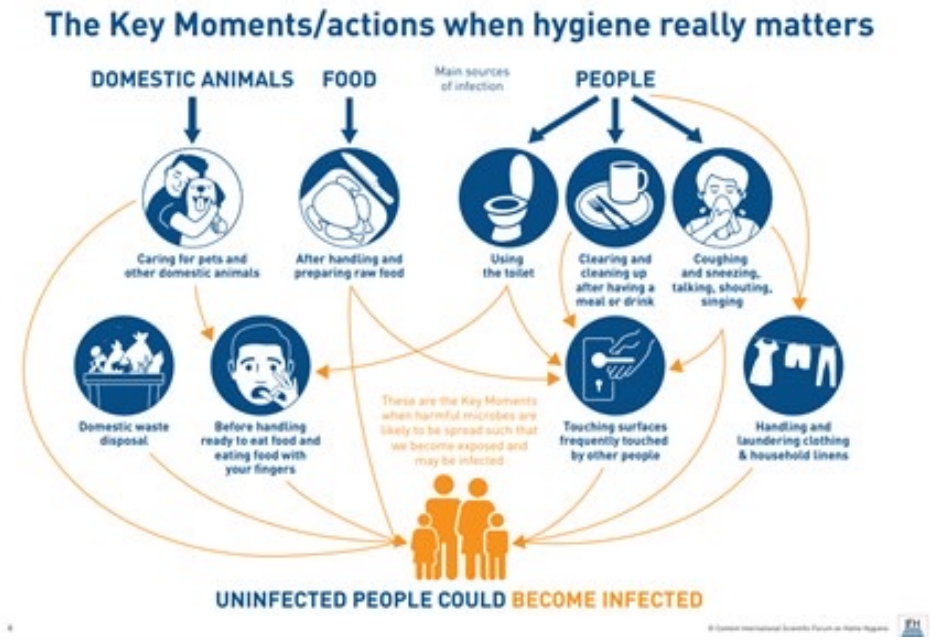
It focuses on hygiene as the public experience it, as a set of interrelated, interdependent actions performed throughout daily life, to prevent exposure to harmful microbes.

Difference between cleanliness and hygiene

What are Germs?

When someone talks about germs we usually go "yuck" – but be careful – it's often used to mean any type of microbe – including the "good guys" – very confusing!

How to put Targeted Hygiene into practice?



Targeted Hygiene recognises the main sources of infection in our homes and everyday lives are not places that we see as “dirty” - but people, contaminated food and pets.

During our daily lives, there are 9 Key Moments when harmful microbes are most likely to be spreading such that we can become exposed and infected. These are the key times when we need to practice Targeted Hygiene.

The Targeted Hygiene approach communicates hygiene actions in the order in which people need to hear it.

Firstly, it identifies the moments in daily lives WHEN practising hygiene is important as shown in fig (e.g handling raw foods or using the toilet).

Secondly, people need to be able to recognise “WHERE” to act at that moment to prevent spreading etc).

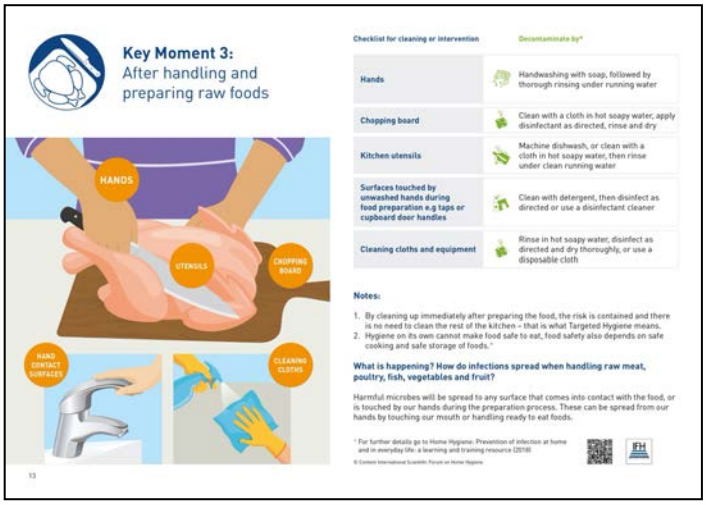
Thirdly, it identifies HOW to practice hygiene in those places (e.g. handwashing, surface cleaning, mask wearing).

Rather than communicating hygiene through written prescriptive guidance that needs to be remembered, this approach can be communicated through visual images and prompts, to develop a better understanding of what effective hygiene means and how it differs from cleanliness.

An issue that now dominates strategic planning is the importance of sustainability. A key advantage of Targeted Hygiene is that it works to avoid unnecessary use of chemical products, thereby reducing environmental impacts. It is also less time consuming and less likely to lead to hygiene fatigue and failure to sustain hygiene behaviours.

Putting Targeted Hygiene into practice – WHEN, WHERE, HOW

Here are examples of some Key Moments

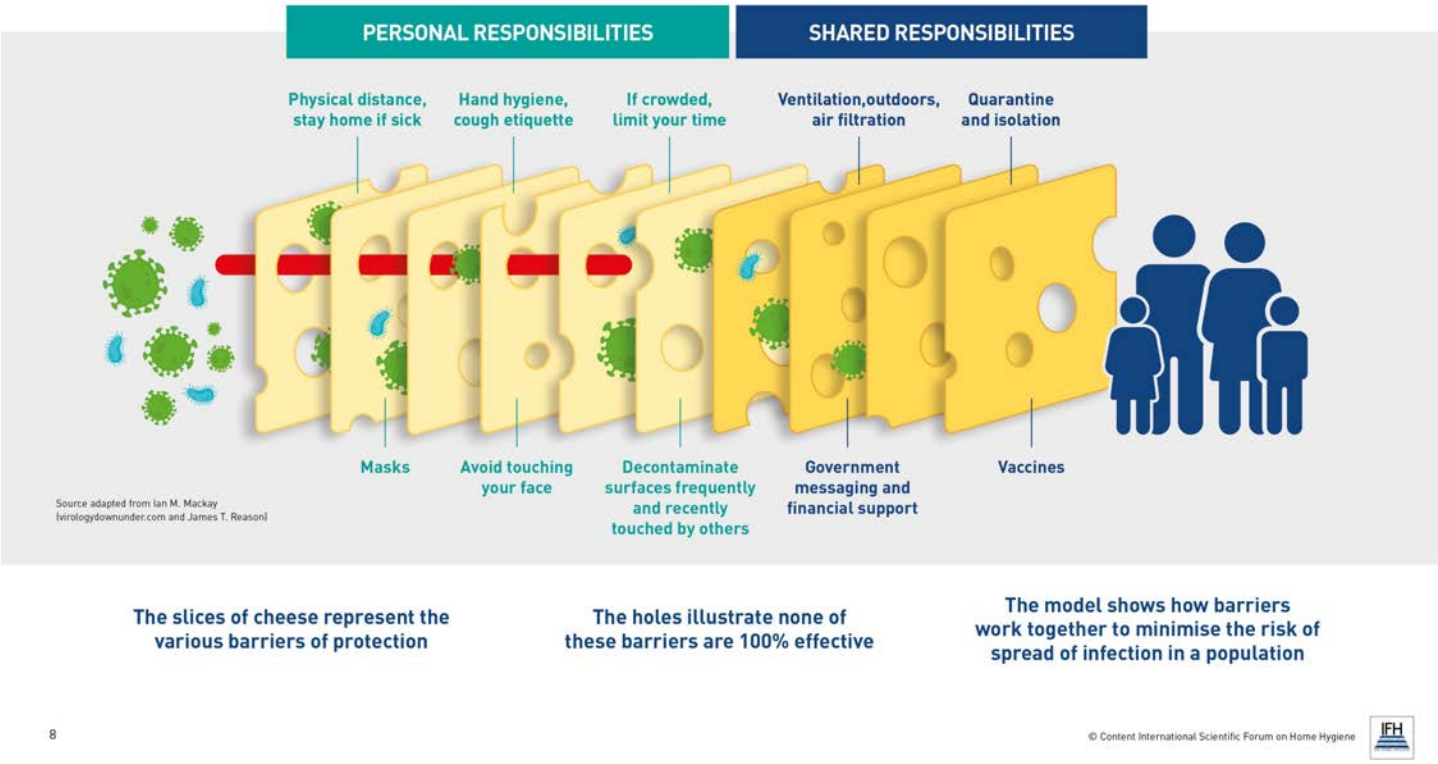


These are not the only moments for Targeted Hygiene, but if we routinely practice hygiene at all of these moments, this will deal with most of the risk of spread of infection in our homes and everyday lives.

The Swiss Cheese Model

A core principle of Targeted Hygiene is that, although, for example, hand hygiene is central to all 'Key Moments', it must be combined with other interventions to ensure risk is contained. This is despite the fact that some hygiene practices may contribute more than others in reducing the overall risk.

Preventing the spread of respiratory infections



The slices of cheese represent the various barriers provided by protection.

The Swiss Cheese Model shows how the barriers work together to minimise the risk of spread of infection in a population.

The holes illustrate that none of these barriers is 100% effective, however, they each help.

Keeping our homes clean i.e. dirt free does not stop spread of germs, but it helps because germs don't survive well in clean dry places.

To learn more about how to put Targeted Hygiene into practice got to:

Breaking the chain of infection in our homes and everyday lives: a practical approach to encourage effective Targeted Hygiene.

https://www.ifh-homehygiene.org/online-learning/breaking-chain-infection-our-homes-and-everyday-lives-practical-approach-encourage

How do we change public understanding?

By dispelling misconceptions about the difference between “cleanliness” (absence of visible dirt) and “hygiene” (protecting against infectious diseases).

By promoting a more positive approach to Targeted Hygiene.

Dispelling misconceptions about hygiene and cleanliness

The public has a lot of misconceptions about cleanliness (absence of dirt) and its relationship to hygiene (preventing spread of infection). For example:

Public confusion and misconceptions

The public are also confused by conflicting stories in the media, some warn against the risk of infectious disease and others warn against the “dangers” of hygiene and cleanliness.

Promoting a more positive approach?

We need to replace old ideas about the so called Hygiene Hypothesis with positive messages by:

Dismissing statements about "modern obsession with cleanliness, living in sterile homes" and so on as the root cause of allergies etc.

Pointing out that the hygiene hypothesis is a misnomer - relaxing "cleanliness and hygiene" would not reverse the trend in allergies etc. – it would only increase infectious disease risks.

Stressing what ARE the major causes of "Microbiome depletion"

Talking about appropriate lifestyle changes to re-engage with our Old Friends: i.e natural childbirth, breastfeeding, avoiding antibiotics, outdoor activity etc.

Stressing that getting dirty is healthy, but hygiene is vital in times and places that matter.

The fundamental question is

“How can we develop lifestyles, together with health policies, which reconnect us with the necessary microbial exposures, whilst also protecting us against infectious diseases?”

In view of current global concerns about infectious diseases and antibiotic resistance, and our growing understanding of how these issues can be tackled through better home and everyday life hygiene, there is an urgent need to ensure that misconceptions about hygiene and cleanliness are replaced with clear understanding of the basic principles of hygiene.

Do we need germ exposure to keep our immune system strong?

Without knowing what is meant by “germs” (any type of microbe or only harmful microbes?) and what is meant by “strong” this is a difficult questions to answer.

In the C20th, its assumed meaning was “Does exposure to harmful microbes strengthen our immune system to fight infections”? But in 1989 the hygiene hypothesis was published proposing a link between rising rates of childhood allergies and living in cleaner homes with higher standards of personal cleanliness.

This was an attractive concept to the media and public who interpreted it as further proof that our modern obsession with cleanliness and hygiene is not only weakening our ability to fight infection but also our ability to “fight off” allergies.

The appeal of this simple analogy deflected us from understanding that allergic diseases occur when the immune system erroneously “fights” allergens because it is unable to recognise they are harmless. It is fighting allergens that causes the symptoms of hay fever, food allergies etc that we experience.

This section gives a brief summary of how the immune system works

– not only to protect us against infection and diseases - but also to protect us from reacting to/fighting harmless agents such as pollens, foods etc causing allergic reactions.

For more information go to:

Is lack of exposure to germs during COVID-19 weakening our systems?”

The immune system, how does it work?

Introduction

To understand both:

- the role of the immune system in protecting us from infectious disease
- the inappropriate over reactions of the immune system which cause allergic and autoimmune diseases.

requires some understanding of how the immune system works. The following is a simplified explanation of what, in reality, is a very complex system.

The immune system is a network of organs, cells, antibodies and chemicals. Its basic function is to prevent and eliminate infections. There are two parts to the system – innate and acquired immunity.

Innate immunity - the first line of defence against invasion.

This system is always present in the body and defends us against any foreign agent, regardless of type, species etc. i.e. it is non specific.

Acquired immunity - the second line defence system against infection which creates a response specific to the invading substance.

When novel substances enter the body, they are recognised as 'foreign'. The body needs to be able to recognise the difference between its own tissues and these foreign invaders. This 'learning' process is particularly important in the early stages of life, e.g. in the womb and shortly after birth.

Substances recognised as foreign by the immune system **(bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites, pollen, dust mites etc)** are called **antigens.**

1. General immunity to infection

This is the function of the **innate immune system** which defends us against any foreign agent regardless of type of species.

Key components include:

- **skin and mucous membrane** (mouth, nose etc) which act as physical barriers preventing access of microbes to underlying tissues.
- A variety of cells (such as **leucocytes and natural killer cells**) which circulate in the blood stream and engulf and eliminate microbes, pollen or dust etc that succeed in entering the body.
- **Plasma proteins** that circulate in the bloodstream or lymphatic system.

There is no evidence that the innate immune system requires “practice” (e.g. constant exposure to foreign agents) to keep it strong).

Factors which reduce general immunity are poor lifestyle and poor health – poor nutrition, malnutrition, excessive alcohol consumption, drug abuse, stress, etc.

2. Specific Immunity to infection – the attacking arm

If the initial innate response to a foreign invader (such as a disease causing pathogen) fails, the **acquired immune system** takes over. This complex system consists of many interrelated components. Two key elements are:

- **B-cells** which produce specific proteins called **antibodies** that neutralise the invader
- **T-cells** that attack the invader or regulate responses of other immune cells

There are many different **T-cells**, but important groups are:

- **Killer cells** destroy pathogen-infected cells and other 'foreign' cells
- **Helper T-cells** (Th) are regulators of cellular immunity.

The attacking arm of the immune system develops in response to exposure to harmful microbes that cause it to react in several ways, most particularly by generating specific antibodies which recognize and neutralise the pathogen. After recovery, the immune system retains memory cells that persist in the body. If re-exposed to the same pathogen, the system mounts the same response to fight off infection. This is the basis of vaccination where the vaccine stimulates antibody production without causing disease symptoms.

Developing **specific immunity** to a particular diseases (e.g. chicken pox, measles, flu) results from catching that disease or being vaccinated against it. We are also probably exposed to small doses of various pathogens in our daily lives - large enough to develop immunity but too small to overwhelm the immune system and make us ill.

Vaccination

After recovery from an infection, the body retains some of the B and T lymphocytes (known as memory cells) which persist in the blood and lymph systems. If re-exposed to the same antigen threat, the memory cells mount a strong rapid immune response.

This is the basis of vaccination e.g. flu virus, treated to destroy their disease causing properties but not their antigenic properties, are injected to induce permanent resistance to the strain of flu.

Do we need exposure to harmful germs to keep our immune system strong?

A popular notion is that clean modern lifestyles may be weakening the immune system, making us less able to fight infectious diseases.

Although acquiring a normal body microbiota during, and in the first months after, birth is critical, to developing the immune system. This does not mean that "regular" infections during childhood and adulthood keep our immune system "strong" and boost our immunity to infection.

People tend to assume that regular exposure to dirt and germs is important for children to build up a strong immune system to fight infection.

Because immunity through antibodies is specific (flu antibodies only protect against flu) the idea that - the more harmful, germs we encounter the "stronger" our immune system - is flawed. However, in recent years evidence has begun to emerge that exposure to an infection can protect against other unrelated infections.

Some recent evidence suggests that some pathogens (if you survive them) may somewhat increase the activity of the innate immune system. However, exposure to potentially lethal infections like measles must be regarded as a very risky strategy for obtaining protection from other infections. Of potential clinical value, is new data suggesting that this nonspecific priming of the immune system can be exerted safely by vaccines but much more work is needed to develop this possibility.

A healthy immune system remains fully functional and ready to fight any new infection or respond to a booster vaccine. Factors that reduce the health (strength) of the immune system - and its ability to fight infection - are poor lifestyle and poor health through poor nutrition, malnutrition, excessive alcohol consumption, drug abuse, stress, etc.

The best way to build general immunity to infection is through a healthy balanced lifestyle

This issue is explored in more detail in a 2022 review:

Is lack of exposure to germs during COVID-19 weakening our systems?"

2. Specific Immunity to infection – the regulatory arm

Do we need exposure to harmful germs to build tolerance to harmless antigens?

Agents such as pollen, dust mites, certain foods etc can act as **antigens** and induce an immune response.

- **Allergic diseases** such as asthma, eczema and food allergies occur when the body overreacts to antigens such as pollen, dust mites etc causing inflammatory responses such as sneezing, constriction of airways etc and irritation.

- **Autoimmune diseases** such as Type 1 diabetes, multiple sclerosis etc occur when the immune system overreacts against the body's own cells and tissues (self antigens). This triggers production of antibodies or inflammatory agents against the body's own cells, causing tissue injury and degradation, typical of autoimmune disease.

The process by which the body prevents itself from attacking its own cells is called **Immune tolerance**.

Regulation of immune responses by exposure to Old Friends (OF)

Acquired immunity is vital to protect against infectious disease, but these immune responses are potentially dangerous if they are not properly regulated, as happens in those who develop allergies and autoimmune diseases

Preventing inappropriate immune responses, is brought about by **regulatory T lymphocytes (Treg cells)** which down regulate allergic and autoimmune reactions, thereby avoiding development of allergic and autoimmune diseases.

In normal humans, T cell secretion that suppress allergic and autoimmune responses is driven, not by exposure to harmful germs, but exposure to Old Friends microbiota (commensal microbiota and environmental microbes). In the absence of stimuli from OFs, **Treg cells** are no longer adequately induced causing increased susceptibility to "overreaction" leading to allergic and autoimmune diseases.

Over time the body has evolved to distinguish antigens of disease-causing microbes that need to be eliminated, from antigens of the OF microbes that need to be tolerated, but which are still recognised by the immune system and interact with it to drive the Treg responses which prevent allergies and autoimmune disease.

Recommended Publications

The hygiene hypothesis and its implications for home hygiene, lifestyle and public health.
Stanwell-Smith R, Bloomfield SF, Rook GA. 2013

https://www.ifh-homehygiene.com/best-practice-review/hygiene-hypothesis-and-its-implications-home-hygiene-lifestyle-and-public-0

The hygiene hypothesis and its implications for home hygiene, lifestyle and public health: summary.
Bloomfield SF, Stanwell-Smith R, Rook GA. 2013

https://www.ifh-homehygiene.org/best-practice-review/hygiene-hypothesis-and-its-implications-home-hygiene-lifestyle-and-public

Time to abandon the hygiene hypothesis: new perspectives on allergic disease, the human microbiome, infectious disease prevention and the role of targeted hygiene.
Bloomfield SF, Rook GA, Scott EA, Shanahan F, Stanwell-Smith R, Turner P.
Perspect Public Health. 2016;136(4):213-24. [DOI: 10.1177/1757913916650225]

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Bloomfield SF 2022.
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https://www.ifh-homehygiene.org/review/lack-exposure-germs-during-covid-19-weakening-our-immune-systems