

5-20-11 Mom and Pop Operations

While it is getting easier to track information about the food we eat, the sources of those food items, along with medicines and herbal supplements and reported problems with them, it is also becoming increasingly tempting to respond to information overload by avoiding the topic all together. I can't afford to do that but I admit that it is tempting for me, too.

I will admit to being less involved with food recalls than I used to be. I used to fax a notice for each and every food recall (if I thought it might apply) to food establishments. It was user friendly and fast. "Check if it does not apply and fax back. Check if it applies and what steps are being or will be taken in response."

It was a great system until I signed up for our U. S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) email updates. I had no idea how frequently problems were discovered and reported. I could not keep up with them and certainly could not fax all of them to all of the food establishments. The larger corporations and the franchises seem to be on top of the situation. So, I switched my focus to the smaller, independently run establishments, calling them at times with new information that might apply. Right now there is recall of certain kinds of cherry tomatoes. It turns out that restaurants rarely use them. They tend to slice larger tomatoes.

Last week, though, while scanning over the many recalls and warnings, there was a new problem catching my attention, potentially affecting some very small operations. I feel compelled to help the small "Mom and Pop" establishments that perhaps might not have the benefit of corporate oversight and tracking.

This latest alert by FDA was of particular interest to me because of a Mom and Pop with a very small operation, planning on celebrating their grand opening in a few weeks. My son Keith and his wife, Tracey, are expecting to welcome a second child in June. As the grandmother, I have to let them and other parents of young children know about this.

FDA's recent MedWatch Safety Alert told us that they continue to receive reports of a rare but serious and even potentially fatal condition associated with the use of benzocaine products. Benzocaine is used for its numbing effect and has been around for a long time. You might know it by the brand names of Anbesol, Hurrricane, Orajel, Baby Orajel, Orabase, and other store brands. That's right: applying this over the counter medication to a teething infant's or toddler's gum may result in a life threatening condition called methemoglobinemia, causing a critical decrease in the amount of oxygen carried in the bloodstream.

The problem has been reported with all strengths of the medication but most of the cases have been with children under the ages of two years old. Within minutes or hours, a 911 call was in order, as the children were turning blue, had a severe headache (if the child could relay that message), shortness of breath, fatigue and rapid heart rate.

FDA is now recommending that these benzocaine products not be used for children under the age of two.

Cold cloths, cold solid teething rings (not fluid filled), rocking and walking the baby are sounding better all the time.

Rather than feel discouraged by more bad news, this update makes me feel fortunate that adverse affects are being tracked more carefully every day. That is but one tiny advantage of the speed and capability of search engines assisting epidemiology, allowing them to monitor and track events, correlate those events, investigate them and arrive at causative connections with confidence, and then pass along those results to us, the consumer.

At one point in time, we did not know that giving aspirin to children suffering from viruses could cause Reye's syndrome. Now, that is common knowledge and it has been great for sales of acetaminophen, better known by its brand name Tylenol. However, because so many people assumed that is was safe, because of the recommendation compared to aspirin for young children, and because it is purchased over-the-counter, without a prescription, it has been widely over used, without regard to the long standing warnings of its potential for causing liver damage.

So, stay informed by your doctor. Read labels, with their dosage recommendations and their warnings. Remember that over-the-counter does not translate as automatically safe. And mostly remember, we will get through this, as did our parents and grandparents and their parents before them. They survived without much medicinal help but with lots of patience, love and common sense. That's what good Mom and Pop operations do.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. For more information on this topic, checkout [Questions and Answers on Benzocaine at FDA](#). As for me, I'm looking forward to the latest addition of my own family's addition to a Mom and Pop operation!