

## Fennel, the Aromatic Herb



Louise Valentine/The Epoch Times

**FENNEL—LITTLE HAY:** Keeps bad breath away and helps digestion.

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Fennel, genus *Foeniculum* meaning "little hay" because of its feathery leaves, has a long history of use as a medicine and food. It belongs to the *Umbelliferae* family, which means umbel, or cluster of flowers, so named as its beautiful yellow flower resembles an umbrella. *Umbelliferae* include wild carrot, parsley, dill, chervil, caraway and coriander. Also included is the renowned poison hemlock, which was used to poison Socrates; so it is a family encompassing the good and the bad.

Fennel's fragrant aroma, similar to licorice or anise, is from the essential oil anethol. Other components are coumarin (an anti-coagulant), flavonoids and sterols (steroids). Now pharmacists use only the seeds, although in the past they used the whole plant. Thought to have originated from the Mediterranean, fennel has since spread throughout Europe, India, Australia and the Americas, and become very popular.

In this era of obesity, we can get some tips from our ancestors on

becoming thin with fennel. Ancient Greek athletes ate the seed for strength without weight gain. During the 17th century, the herbalist and astrologer Nicholas Culpepper claimed fennel could help those with excess weight to become lean by drinking the broth or tea made from the whole plant. In the Middle Ages people cheated a little, nibbling fennel to suppress hunger during periods of fasting.

The seeds are chewed as a breath freshener and also used in tooth-paste. Indian restaurants often offer fennel seeds in bowls for their customers as they have a salutary effect on digestion.

The Saxons regarded it as one of their nine sacred herbs, believing it to be a cure for the nine causes of disease. They also believed fennel was a magical herb, able to keep evil spirits from their homes. During Midsummer's Eve when evil spirits celebrated by dancing about, fennel seeds placed in keyholes would keep them out.

In many cultures fennel was used to dispel the poison from snakebites or scorpion stings.

It is one of the ingredients of "gripe water" given to babies for colic. It

has many benefits for the digestive system, including eliminating gas, and it was thus often cooked with gassy foods such as fish. According to Culpepper "it expels wind, provokes urine, eases the pain of stone and helps break it." It increases milk flow in lactating mothers, but is not recommended for pregnant moms because it has phytoestrogens. Other than this, the FDA finds it safe.

It is easy to grow, but, be warned, it can grow to a very grand six feet, although most cultivated plants will be shortened by the constant trimming for salads and other dishes. Wild fennel resembles poison hemlock, so be careful if you are a wild plant gatherer.

One way to make fennel tea is to pour a pint of boiling water over a teaspoon of crushed dried fennel seed and steep for 5—10 minutes.

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## Smoking and Obesity Put 80 Million Americans at Risk

LONDON (Reuters)—More than 80 million American adults are smokers, obese or both and face an increased risk of poor health and an early death, researchers said on May 11.

They used data from a 2002 national health interview survey to estimate the proportion of adults in the United States who have one or both problems.

Roughly 4 percent of Americans, or nine million people, fall into both categories with a disproportionate number among the poor and those who have a low education.

"Nearly 41.5 percent of adults (81 million aged 18 or older) in the U.S. are obese or smoke and about 4.7 percent smoke and are obese," said Cheryl Heaton, the head of the anti-tobacco organization American Legacy Foundation in Washington.

"Obesity and cigarette smoking are primary risk factors for several chronic conditions and early death in a large number of people in the United States," she added.

The research published in the British Medical Journal showed that 23.5 percent of adults were obese, 22.7 percent smoked.

Among people who were obese and smoked, the proportion was higher in African Americans than other racial or ethnic groups.

Research has shown that smoking is a leading cause of preventable death. It increases the risk of heart attack and stroke, respiratory problems as well as lung and other types of cancer.

Obesity raises the odds of suffering from diabetes, cardiovascular dis-

ease, joint problems, depression and some cancers.

Heaton and her colleagues called for more research into treatments for people who smoke and are obese.



Spencer Platt/Getty Images

**DOUBLE WHAMMY:** Smoking and obesity increase one's risk of health problems.

"Clinical trials should monitor the effects of programs aimed at simultaneous stopping smoking and weight control to document and respond to any unintended consequences," she said in the study.

## Brain Study Shows Waiting is Traumatic

NEW YORK (Reuters Health)—Anyone who has ever waited in dread of having a root canal may find some comfort in the findings of a new brain-imaging study.

For some people, researchers say, the waiting is indeed the hardest part, and finding a distraction might help.

Their study, published in the journal *Science*, used a brain-imaging technique called functional MRI to investigate the neural mechanisms underlying dread—specifically the agony of waiting to have a painful procedure.

It found that among 32 volunteers who agreed to have a series of shocks to the foot, some of them dreaded each shock so much that they repeatedly opted to have a higher-voltage jolt just so they could get it over with more quickly.

These individuals, dubbed "extreme dreaders," showed greater activity in a brain region related to both pain and attention. The findings, say the researchers, indicate that dread arises not from simple fear, but from the brain's attention to the unpleasant event.

"The dread is often worse than the event itself," said lead study author Dr. Gregory S. Berns, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta.

The brain-imaging results are "good news," he told Reuters Health, because they indicate that extreme dreaders can do something to alleviate the problem: find a distraction—such as meditation, exercise or some other activity—to take the focus off the anticipated event.

For the study, Berns and his colleagues took brain images of volunteers who agreed to endure electrical shocks to their feet. First, each jolt was preceded by a cue that told participants how intense it would be—60 percent of their maximum pain tolerance, for instance—and how long they would have to wait for it.

In a second go-around, participants were presented with choices on how each shock should be delivered, with the voltage and timing of the jolt as the variables. For example, they could choose between having a shock at 90 percent of their maximum pain

tolerance delivered in the next 3 seconds, or one at 60 percent intensity in 27 seconds.

Of the 32 volunteers, nine—the extreme dreaders—consistently opted for the stronger shock in order to avoid the longer wait.

This may seem illogical for many people, Berns said, but for extreme dreaders avoiding the anguished wait makes sense.

And it was the extreme dreaders who showed particularly high activity in the brain's so-called pain matrix during the build-up to their electrical shocks—specifically, in areas related to attention, but not those associated with fear and anxiety.

In other words, extreme dreaders were giving more attention to their foot than "mild dreaders" were.

So finding a distraction may be the best way for extreme dreaders to deal with the wait for a medical procedure, Berns said. This, he noted, is something many people have "subjectively" known, but the new findings reveal the brain basis for it.

Source: *Science*, May 5, 2006

## Day Care Increases Risk of Allergic Symptoms

NEW YORK (Reuters Health)—Preschool-age children who attend day care have a heightened risk of developing respiratory and allergy symptoms, according to results of a study conducted by Swedish researchers.

Dr. Linda Hagerhed-Engman, of SP Swedish National Testing and Research Institute in Borås, and colleagues examined the effect of day care attendance and age on respiratory and allergic diseases in children between the ages of one and six years.

The parents of more than 10,800 children completed a cross-sectional

survey. Along with respiratory and allergy symptoms, questions focused on the home environment and information about day care.

In the last 12 months, compared with children in home care, children in day care had more symptoms, including an increased risk of 33 percent for wheeze, 56 percent for cough at night, 23 percent for doctor diagnosed asthma, 15 percent for rhinitis, 75 percent for doctor-diagnosed hay fever, 49 percent for eczema, and 27 percent for food allergy.

In addition, the odds of having more than six colds in the last 12 months

was increased by more than 2.5-fold, and for ever having an ear infection by more than 2.0-fold, among children attending day care.

The increased risks were most pronounced for the youngest group of children, those between the ages of one and four years.

In light of the significant increases in allergic diseases in Sweden over the last decades, the researchers conclude that the "findings justify a significant public health concern."

Source: *Allergy*, April 2006



Marco Di Lauro/Stringer/Getty Images

**DAY CARE DANGERS:** Children in day care are more at risk for respiratory and allergic symptoms.

## Eleven: Key Age for Obese Children

LONDON (Reuters)—Children who are overweight or obese by the age of 11 are likely to carry their excess weight into adulthood and to suffer from related health problems, researchers said on May 5.

A study by scientists at University College London who tracked nearly 6,000 children in Britain over five years showed about a quarter had a weight problem when they entered secondary school.

"Children who joined the study at age 11 and were already plump did not slim down at all over the five years of follow-up," said team head

Professor Jane Wardle.

The research, published online by the British Medical Journal, suggests that by the age of 11 a tendency to be overweight or obese is already set.

"It looked like obesity at 11 is already persistent obesity, so these things are being set earlier than we had previously thought," she told Reuters.

Although the findings related to British children, Wardle said there is no reason to suspect that the same phenomenon would not be seen in other countries.

"I think of it as being part of the whole obesity epidemic. What is happening is that persistent obesity is starting earlier and earlier," she added.

Health experts expect child obesity rates to soar in most parts of the world by the end of the decade. In Europe the number could reach 26 million, according to the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF).

Overweight children face an in-

creased risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, raised cholesterol levels and cancer as they grow older.

Wardle and her team said 29 percent of girls were overweight or obese, which was more than in boys. It rose to 38 percent among black girls but fell to 20 percent for Asian females.

There was little difference in weight in boys of different ethnic origins, but 31 percent of students from a deprived socio-economic background had a weight problem, according to the research.

Changes in diet, less exercise and too much time spent in front of television and computer screens have been blamed for the obesity rise.

North America, Europe and parts of the Western Pacific have the highest prevalence of overweight children.

Wardle said the findings of the study, which was funded by the charity Cancer Research U.K., highlight the need for early intervention to prevent childhood and adult obesity.

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