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BABY IT'S COLD OUTSIDE

The pediatrician suggested that my husband and I keep our daughter at home for the first three months of her life. No malls, no grocery stores, no contact with strangers. Prevent her from picking up any nasty germs. Sound advice. I certainly intended to follow it. He did get me thinking, though, about bugs and parasites. In ways I'd never dreamed of before. And to make it even more intense, every man, woman, and family member with an opinion on caring for a baby had a story to tell me of an obscure symptom or odd malady to watch for. Words like roseola, impetigo, and variella came out of my mouth with ease.

I'd never paid too much attention to astrology before, because I'm a cancer. The crab. The cranky disease. Who wants to be that? But our reputation is for being

mothering homebodies. So I decided just to go with that aspect of the sign and spend my days alone in the house with my kid. As much as was humanly possible anyway.

AND THE LOSER IS . . .

I was watching the Donahue show and he was soliciting tapes for a "Best Husband Video Contest." Mine would be perfect. There were four categories. Best looking. No problem. He's pretty cute. Most attentive. No contest. How many husbands taste, question, and buffer for their wives? Most unusual talent. There are so many. Checking cuts on people's hands without their noticing. Differentiating between blood and red spices in food. Getting medical histories from people with Band-Aids. And finally, most romantic, I tend to discourage that kind of thing, so who could blame him for suppressing that part of his personality. I made a video, sent it in, and he was chosen as one of five finalists to appear on the show.

FROM YOUR MOUTH

I learned all about the cold sore because of this old neighbor of ours. Chronologically old. She had one just below her lip and I was pretty certain I didn't want that in my family. So I did a little checking. Into the virus. And it's a tricky little virus at that. Maybe insidious is a
better word. I read where it can live up to three hours on a surface in your home. Obviously that’s extreme and conditions need to be favorable. It must be an oozing sore, and somehow that excretion has to end up on the table or wherever. But once it’s there, you sure don’t want to touch it. Now, our neighbor didn’t have an oozier. Her cold sore was just a series of red bumps. Which is still pretty gross, but much less virulent. In the case of the non-oozing brand, contact must be pretty direct to actually transmit the virus. Say, a kiss on the lips, or some other mucous membrane. The sore is contagious for about a week, right before it appears, when there’s apparently a tingling feeling, and then until it’s covered by a scab. After the scab is gone, there can be a patch of fresh pink skin which looks a little spooky, but is in no way contagious. And it’s pretty common. The virus. Apparently, 50 percent of people who get cold sores have their first outbreak by the time they’re five.

So the woman and her series of red bumps came over. My husband offered her a glass of lemonade because it was hot out. And she accepted because, I guess, she was thirsty. I try to be a good hostess, but it just doesn’t seem kosher to have herpes on my stuff. The woman was old, but still pretty sharp and I think she was able to sense my discomfort with the whole sordid affair. Maybe it was all the whispering I was doing to my husband. Then again it could have been the look of panic on my face or possibly just that I wouldn’t let her anywhere near my daughter. Whatever the case, she started to get a little teary and by the time she was about to leave, it was like we had in our possession that last remaining bit of the smallpox virus. She suggested we just smash the glass and save the world from her plague. It’s not like I didn’t consider it, but I can impose reason. I just left the glass on the table for three hours and then ran it through the dishwasher twice.
MONTH TWO: KITTY LITTER

My brother isn’t the picture of health, so I was a little concerned when he flew to LA for a visit right about the time the fetus was starting to grow all his major organs and body parts. Who knew what infections my brother would be bringing into my home. And then consequently what my son would be missing. I came up with a plan. Not horribly original, but a plan nonetheless. I had my husband occupy my brother with a tour of the local sites, the La Brea Tar Pits, Hollywood Boulevard. Finally, though, I had to face the moment when my brother and his wadded-up Kleenex came to my place. My husband parked the car in the garage that was underneath our apartment. I heard the door close, so I went to the window to watch him and my brother. That’s when I noticed my brother stepping on a trail of

this beigish-pinkish pebbly stuff. I squinted my eyes to try to get a better look, to figure out what that substance was. Dirty cat litter. Oeea. When my husband and brother got to the door, I tried to get them to take their shoes off before coming in. My husband obliged. My brother wouldn’t. He stayed and chatted with my husband for about an hour. I just knelled in the corner of the room. I was certain that the litter and all the germs contained in it were now a permanent part of my carpet. I was a little concerned about how I was going to make it through seven more months. I needed help. I called 1-800-DOCTOR. His advice was to just “Go ahead and vacuum it up.” Clearly he didn’t know about the damned if you do, damned if you don’t theory. I couldn’t vacuum the carpet because if I happened to accidentally roll over the carpet with the wheel of the vacuum, then the litter would be on the wheel, and also everywhere else I rolled it. Damned if I vacuum, damned if I don’t. I looked into having the carpet professionally cleaned, but that was no good because they clean carpets with soap and water, but with chemicals. My next move was to talk to the owner of the cat. If the cat stayed indoors, and never ate raw meat, then she probably didn’t have toxoplasmosis—the disease that could be transmitted through dirty cat litter. It was particularly insidious because I wouldn’t show any symptoms. I could never be sure I was infected, but while I worried, toxo would be destroying my baby. The owner of the cat was com
Emily Colas

pletely apologetic about the trail of dirty litter, but less forthcoming about her cat’s medical history. Surely, she admitted it was an indoor cat, but did he ever get out? This would raise the possibility of having, say, killed a bird and gotten toxo. Or did she ever leave thawing meat around the house that the cat may have licked? Another way for the cat to get infected. She just stared at me with that familiar “You know medication might help you” look and slowly closed the door on me. Since there was no way to know for sure about the safety of the litter, we instituted the shoes-off rule. Everyone who came into the house had to remove his shoes at the door, and not touch the soles since it was clear people didn’t bother to look at what they step on. My husband became an expert at sliding any kind of shoes on his feet without using his hands at all.