Healing Power of GERMS
Don’t say, “ick!” They could make you feel better.

Maybe we shouldn’t try so hard to avoid cooties: Exposure to certain germs may keep people healthier.

This is especially true during childhood. In a 2002 report, University of Arizona pediatrician Thomas Ball found that children who attended day care during their first three years—and were thus exposed to more germs than stay-at-home youngsters—had one-third as many colds when they started school. Encountering viruses early primes the immune system, making it easier to fend off germs, says Ball.

More surprising, Ball’s research has shown that exposure to germs seems to protect against asthma, a still-unexplained allergic condition in which the airways become constricted. Children who attended day care or who grew up with siblings were generally half as likely as more solitary children to develop the condition.

Even intestinal parasites may protect us. Over the past 40 years, infection with pinworm has dramatically declined, thanks to better hygiene.

But as the worms have been eliminated, a condition called inflammatory bowel disease, which causes diarrhea, has undergone an unexplained increase in developed nations. IBD is rare in poorer countries, however, where intestinal parasites are still common.

How might germs protect us? One theory is that the body’s defenses develop normally only when they have invaders to respond to. Lacking them, the immune system turns against healthy tissue, causing allergies or conditions like IBD. Another guess is that germ exposure early in life results in increased levels of the hormones that help keep the immune system in balance.

No one’s saying we should give up on hygiene. But critters could help us: In one study, University of Iowa gastroenterologist Joel Weinstock infected IBD patients with harmless worms, and symptoms vanished in seven of eight patients. Someday, probiotics, the helpful bacteria, may take their place beside antibiotics.

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READER’S DIGEST

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