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Health Highlights: April 24, 2008

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Here are some of the latest health and medical news developments, compiled by editors of HealthDay:

Proximity to Mercury Pollution Source Linked to Autism Risk

The first study to show a statistical relationship between autism and proximity to industrial sites that release mercury has been published by researchers at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

Their analysis of data from 1,040 Texas school districts and data from 39 coal-fired power plants and 56 industrial facilities in the state showed that autism rates decreased by one percent to two percent for each 10 miles of distance from a mercury pollution source.

Among the other findings:

For every 1,000 pounds of mercury released by all industrial sources in Texas in 1998, there was a corresponding 2.6 percent increase in autism rates in Texas school districts in 2002. For every 1,000 pounds of mercury released by Texas power plants in 1998, there was a corresponding 3.7 percent increase in autism rates in Texas school districts in 2002.

The research appears in the journal *Health & Place*.

"This study was not designed to understand which individuals in the population are at risk due to mercury exposure. However, it does suggest generally that there is greater autism risk closer to the polluting source," lead author Raymond Palmer, associate professor of family and community medicine, said in a prepared statement.

Experts Stress Importance of Childhood Vaccinations

As part of National Infant Immunization Week (April 19-26), parents, caregivers and health providers are being reminded of the benefits of vaccination and the importance of routine childhood vaccination.

"A substantial number of children in the United States still aren't adequately protected from vaccine-preventable diseases," Dr. Anne Schuchat, director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, said in a prepared statement.

"The suffering or death of even one child from a vaccine-preventable disease is an unnecessary human tragedy. Let us renew our efforts to ensure that no child, adolescent or adult will have to needlessly suffer from a vaccine-preventable disease," she said.

Schuchat said there are vaccines to protect children against 15 diseases before the age of 2, yet more than 20 percent of 2-year-olds in the United States aren't fully immunized against infectious diseases to which they're

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especially vulnerable.

While vaccinating infants is especially important because they're more vulnerable to many diseases than older children and adults, "it's important for adults to also be vaccinated to keep themselves healthy and to keep from spreading infections to vulnerable people, including children," Schuchat said.

Senate to Vote on Genetic Information Bill

The U.S. Senate was to vote Thursday on a bill that would protect people from losing their jobs or health insurance if they have genetic testing to find out if they're predisposed to serious diseases.

Under the proposed legislation, insurance companies could not use genetic information to set premiums or determine eligibility, and employers would be prohibited from using genetic information to hire, fire or promote workers, the Associated Press reported.

It's expected the Senate will pass the measure by a large margin and the House of Representatives could take it up early next week, before sending it to President Bush for his signature. A similar bill approved last year had White House support.

While genetic testing could help patients with a wide range of hereditary-based diseases get early, lifesaving treatment, many people have expressed concern that genetic information could be used against them.

If patient protection is guaranteed by law, "researchers and clinicians can actively encourage Americans to participate in clinical trials and appropriate genetic testing unencumbered by the fear of discrimination based upon the results," Aravinda Chakravarti, president of the American Society of Human Genetics, told the AP.

New Law Strengthens Mad Cow Disease Safeguards

Certain cattle materials that carry the highest risk of mad cow disease cannot be included in any animal feed, including pet food, says a U.S. Food and Drug Administration final regulation announced Wednesday.

The prohibited materials include the brains and spinal cords from cattle 30 months of age and older. The entire carcass of cattle not inspected and passed for human consumption is also prohibited, unless the cattle are less than 30 months old, or the brains and spinal cords have been removed, the FDA said.

It's believed the risk of mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy -- BSE) is extremely low in cattle less than 30 months old.

The final rule is effective a year from now in order to give the livestock, meat, rendering, and feed industries time to adapt their practices to the new regulation, which is designed to strengthen existing safeguards against mad cow disease, the FDA said.

Atlantic City Bans Smoking in Casinos

Many employees of Atlantic City casinos felt like they won the jackpot after city council voted 9-0 Wednesday to plug a loophole in a statewide ban on smoking in public places that excluded casinos.