requirement at higher temperatures. Among its other effects on human physiology, fever enhances neutrophil migration and production of superoxides; it promotes T-cell proliferation and increases the release and activity of interferon. Interestingly, some of fever’s apparently beneficial stimulation of immunologic function may be reversed at very high temperatures, in the hyperpyretic range.

Unfortunately, no conclusive experimental information is available to prove that fever benefits humans clinically in the course of an infection, and some data suggest that at least within the context of endotoxemia, the metabolic cost of fever may contribute to mortality. As a stimulant of immunologic activity, fever may enhance protection against future illness following re-exposure to an infecting pathogen. Certainly in a teleologic sense, its metabolic cost argues for fever generally playing some protective role in the infected host. A process that results in a 7% to 10% increase in energy expenditure for every 1°C rise in temperature is not likely to have persisted so widely in nature among invertebrates, fish, amphibians, and reptiles, as well as birds and mammals, for so many millions of years without conferring some survival advantage.

Henry M. Adam, MD
Editor, In Brief

Comment: In this extremely content-rich Brief there are a number of different explanations for why some elevation in temperature may contribute to the body’s improved immune response to an infectious agent. The pediatrician is in the best position to pass this information on to the parent, especially the anxious parent who worries about the effect of fever on his or her child. Perhaps we can make a real dent in the “fever phobia” that so often pervades those late night phone calls. Every little bit helps!

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