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An Epidemic Of Absence: A New Way Of Understanding Allergies And Autoimmune Diseases

"What in the world does the ecosystem of microbes living in the gut have to do with the development of autism or heart disease or allergy? Quite possibly everything, according to this masterful work of science writing . . . one of the first comprehensive reports from the most exciting frontier in modern medicine."

—MICHAEL POLLAN, BN.COM,
AUTHOR OF *COOKED* AND *IN DEFENSE OF FOOD*

AN EPIDEMIC OF ABSENCE

A New Way of
Understanding Allergies
and Autoimmune Diseases

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD



MOISES VELASQUEZ-MANOFF



Synopsis

A brilliant, cutting-edge exploration of the dramatic rise of allergic and autoimmune diseases and the controversial, potentially groundbreaking therapies that scientists are developing to correct these disorders. Whether it is asthma, food or pollen allergies, type-1 diabetes, lupus, multiple sclerosis, or Crohnâ™s disease, everyone knows someone who suffers from an allergic or autoimmune disorder. And if it appears that the prevalence of these maladies has increased recently, thatâ™s because it hasâ™to levels never before seen in human history. These days no fewer than one in fiveâ™and likely moreâ™Americans suffers from one of these ailments. We seem newly, and bafflingly, vulnerable to immune system malfunction. Why? Science writer Moises Velasquez-Manoff explains the latest thinking about this problem and explores the remarkable new treatments in the works. In the past 150 years, improved sanitation, water treatment, and the advent of vaccines and antibiotics have saved countless lives, nearly eradicating diseases that had plagued humanity for millennia. But now, a growing body of evidence suggests that the very steps we took to combat infections also eliminated organisms that kept our bodies in balance. The idea that we have systematically cleaned ourselves to illness challenges deeply entrenched notions about the value of societal hygiene and the harmful nature of microbes. Yet scientists investigating the rampant immune dysfunction in the developed world have inevitably arrived at this conclusion. To address this global âœepidemic of absence,â™ they must restore the human ecosystem. This groundbreaking book explores the promising but controversial âœworm therapyâ™, a deliberate infection with parasitic wormsâ™in development to treat autoimmune disease. It explains why farmersâ™ children so rarely get hay fever, why allergy is less prevalent in former Eastern Bloc countries, and how one cancer-causing bacterium may be good for us. It probes the link between autism and a dysfunctional immune system. It investigates the newly apparent fetal origins of allergic diseaseâ™that a motherâ™s inflammatory response imprints on her unborn child, tipping the scales toward allergy. In the future, preventive treatmentâ™something as simple as a probioticâ™will necessarily begin before birth. An Epidemic of Absence asks what will happen in developing countries, which, as they become more affluent, have already seen an uptick in allergic disease: Will India end up more allergic than Europe? Velasquez-Manoff also details a controversial underground movement that has coalesced around the treatment of immune-mediated disorders with parasites. Against much of his better judgment, he joins these do-it-yourselfers and reports his surprising results. An Epidemic of Absence considers the critical immune stimuli we inadvertently lost as we modernized, and the modern ills we may be able to correct by restoring them. At stake is nothing less than our health, and that of our loved ones. Researchers, meanwhile, have the good

fortune of living through a paradigm shift, one of those occasional moments in the progress of science when a radically new way of thinking emerges, shakes things up, and suggests new avenues of treatment. You'll discover that you're not you at all, but a bustling collection of organisms, an ecosystem whose preservation and integrity require the utmost attention and care.

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Customer Reviews

As a physician, I found Velasquez-Manoff's book a fascinating read. "An Epidemic of Absence" is quite obviously a labor of love by the author, as he poured through thousands of scientific studies to answer the question: Are our own healthy habits actually making us more unhealthy? More than ever, our Western society is focused on germs - eradicating and avoiding them. Could it be that eradicating these germs actually opens ourselves up to diseases that we wouldn't otherwise be exposed to? Velasquez-Manoff points to our gastrointestinal tract as, quite possibly, the most important organ in our body. It is filled with billions of intestinal microbes that function as more than just digestive aids. He hypothesizes that these microbes also function to educate the immune cells of our body, and altering these microbes (such as with antibiotics, sanitary measures, and even de-worming pills) can wreck havoc on our bodies. Our immune systems then go out-of-control,

contributing to such conditions as allergies, asthma, diabetes, arthritis, Crohn's disease, and even autism. He also hypothesizes that the alterations to our immune system can also contribute to other, seemingly-unrelated, diseases such as depression. If the hypotheses in this book are proven correct, then its ramifications to the practice of modern medicine are profound. In this book, the author presents his findings in interesting and even self-deprecating ways. He even enters the somewhat unusual group of patients who purposely infect themselves with intestinal worms. Do the worms help the author improve his balding? You'll have to read to find out! This book joins another book released this year that I consider a 'must read.'

In a comprehensive and compelling book, Moises Velaquez Manoff has provided an updated version of the hygiene hypothesis to explain: Why is there more autoimmune diseases in the modern world? While the idea that we are now no longer exposed to enough pathogens and therefore our immune system is beginning to attack our bodies is certainly not new, the author has provided a comprehensive review of the lots of new evidence supporting this hypothesis. This area of research is growing rapidly and as an active research scientist in this field, I found this book to be a terrific compilation of almost all the most important studies out there. Through interviews with most of the leading scientists in this field, the author has been able to synthesize their thoughts into laypersons terms. I gave this book to my parents after reading it, because it explained to them the concepts behind the type of research that I was doing now. Indeed, if I were to have the time, this would have been the book that I would have liked to write. There are very few things missing in it, and indeed many more ideas and stories that I had never come across. The book is also livened up by personal stories of individuals who have taken matters into their own hands by infecting themselves with parasites to treat their symptoms of auto-immunity. Indeed, the author chronicles his own voyage in this regard. His writing captures the personalities of some of these individuals very well and reminds us that these autoimmune diseases are devastating many lives in our modern world.

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