

By Margaret Guthrie

## Dishing dirt

### In new book, an immunologist explains why an intimate connection to the earth beneath our feet can keep us healthy

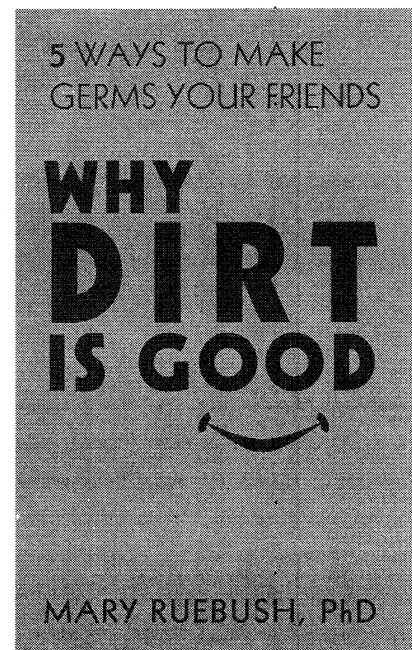
[Published 20th March 2009 02:55 PM GMT]

Mary Ruebush, an immunologist at the Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, & Idaho Rural Health Research Center, points to a report of last winter's outbreak of *Haemophilus influenzae* meningitis in Minneapolis as the perfect illustration of why people should read her new book *Why Dirt is Good*.

*Why Dirt is Good* conveys in clear detail how the body works to immunize itself against infection and disease. Without condescension, Ruebush explains how self-immunization begins in utero and continues throughout our lives to protect and defend the human body. She also explains what we're doing to hinder and obstruct our bodies' natural defenses. "Dirt" to Ruebush is anything to which the human body's immune system might take exception, immediately working to defend the body from the invader.

Ruebush starts her tour through immunity in the womb, with mother sharing crucial antibodies with her developing child. The sharing continues through breastfeeding and moves on to childhood and the need for every child's immune system to be exposed to some good, honest dirt. Ruebush takes on society's fixation with antibacterial soaps, our current over-reliance on antibiotics and the effects of these habits on our overall health. Robbed of a close connection to "dirt," more and more of us are falling prey to asthma, allergies and even autoimmune diseases. Bacteria and viruses are thriving, replicating and adapting as never before, giving us newer versions of MRSA (Methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) and other pathogens.

Ruebush also places vaccines in the "dirt" category as she explains how they assist the body in preparing good defenses against diseases that used to kill or cripple. She takes issue with those who are choosing not to vaccinate their children. "I'd like to see us return to common sense," Ruebush told *The Scientist*. When asked about the measles vaccine/autism debate, Ruebush reacted angrily. "That urban legend arose on the basis of one bit of research that was completely flawed," she said, in reference to Andrew Wakefield's now discredited paper in *The Lancet*. "The guy observed 12 patients with no controls whatsoever and because some of those patients excreted live viruses [from the measles vaccine] in their stool, the debate has gone on about the vaccine causing autism. We don't know what causes autism."



Ruebush's view is supported by the American Association of Pediatrics, which states on its website: "Extensive reports from both the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Institute of Medicine and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conclude that there is no proven association between Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism."

*Dirt's* closing salvo details Ruebush's plea for a return to common sense. She advises readers to wait and see what develops before they rush to the drugstore for over the counter medication that will simply suppress their symptoms and not help in any real way. She tells parents what to do with a baby who develops a cold, what to do when you develop a cold, and when, exactly, to call for medical assistance.

Ruebush said writing *Why Dirt is Good* was a golden opportunity to express the ideas and thoughts she's gathered over years of teaching, research and writing about infectious diseases and immunology. She said she feels that the public is currently misinformed about over the counter and prescription drugs and too often sees them as cure-alls, rather than fallbacks when nature needs some assistance. Her book is well written, thoughtful, and would make a terrific gift for an expectant couple. It would make an equally terrific gift for the germophobe in your life.

*Why Dirt is Good: 5 Ways to Make Germs Your Friends*, by Mary Ruebush, PhD, Kaplan Publishing, New York, 2009. 170 pp. ISBN: 978-1-427-79804-6. \$19.95

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