

January 2007

# The Health Advisor

By Brooke Bennett

Is It a Dirty Neck or a Sign of Diabetes?

Have you noticed a patch of dark, rough or “dirty looking” skin on your child’s neck, armpit, knees or knuckles? If so, look a little closer before telling him to scrub harder in the bath tub. The “dirty looking” patch of skin may actually be a sign that your child is at increased risk for developing diabetes.

Commonly called “dirty neck,” this condition is known in medical terms as acanthosis nigricans (AAY-can-THO-sis NIG-ruh-cans) or A.N. The exact cause of A.N. is unknown, but it has been linked to overweight/obesity and insulin resistance.

Insulin is a hormone that helps your body use blood sugar as fuel. It also keeps blood sugar levels normal. Insulin resistance is a condition in which the body can’t use insulin properly so it has to make more and more of it to keep blood sugar levels normal. Some experts think that build-up of extra insulin may cause the skin discoloration of A.N. Both obesity and insulin resistance are associated with an increased risk for diabetes.

The dark, rough, “velvety” patches that are characteristic of A.N. usually appear on parts of the body that bend or rub against each other - such as the neck, armpits, waist, elbows, toes and knuckles. The darkened areas on the skin are often mistaken for dirt or poor hygiene. Parents may want to scrub their child’s skin to get rid of these spots, but this will not return the skin to its original color! If you think your child may have A.N., contact your pediatrician or local doctor for an evaluation. The doctor will be able to offer suggestions on how to reduce the appearance of A.N.

It is important to remember that the appearance of “dirty neck” does not mean your child has or will get diabetes, but it may be a sign of increased risk. Talk to your doctor about additional warning signs of diabetes and steps you can take to help lower your child’s risk.

*Brooke Bennett is a nutritionist with Bronx Health REACH, a program committed to eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes in the southwest Bronx.*