

NEW ORLEANS — The main cause of soaring asthma rates may be social conditions linked to poverty, an asthma expert said Wednesday.

New studies show poor neighborhoods in Chicago and New York have been hardest hit, says Dr. Kevin Weiss, George Washington University Medical School, Washington, D.C. Asthma is growing most rapidly in children under 5, he told the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Crowded housing could spur the spread of respiratory viruses that lead to asthma, Weiss says. Also, more low birth-weight babies are surviving. "They may be vulnerable to asthma in ways we don't understand yet," Weiss says. A recent decline in breast feeding also could leave young kids at higher asthma risk, Weiss suggests.

In kids under 18, the number of asthma hospitalizations was 168,000 in 1987, up from 111,000 in 1979. In 1987, 54% of these were kids 4 and under, vs. 46% in 1979.

### Brush up on dental health for Halloween

Halloween doesn't have to be a dental nightmare if parents monitor the amount of candy and length of time children eat sweets, experts say.

"We realize kids are going to eat the candy anyway. We just want to encourage parents to do it in a smarter way," says Dr. Roger Anderson, a Denver dentist.

Anderson says it's better — at least for the teeth — to eat a whole bag of candy in 15 minutes than to keep nibbling all day. Reason: The longer bacteria stay on the teeth, the greater potential for cavities.

Among the worst for teeth: hard candy, caramel corn, candy corn, and other hard or sticky foods.

Alternatives: peanuts, beef jerky, popcorn, fruit, sugarless candy or sugarless gum — and milk chocolate, whose ingredients modify the mouth's acid production.

### Are U.S. school kids getting a bad rap?

A National Science Foundation researcher is attacking what she calls the myth that U.S. school kids don't do as well as those from other countries on tests in math and science.

Iris Rotberg, in a report out today in the journal of the National Academy of Engineering, says the tests on which those comparisons are based are flawed. They often compare one nation's most select students with more average kids from the U.S., she says, and valid comparisons can't be done because of the great cultural and socioeconomic differences between countries.

Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, says Rotberg is "right on some exams, wrong on others" and one need only talk to college professors to hear that U.S. kids don't measure up. He says, for example, 30% of German students are doing work equal to or better than what the top 5% in the USA can do.

Rotberg adds that in spite of the test scores, the U.S. has maintained a level of scientific productivity that "by many measures of performance, is overwhelming."

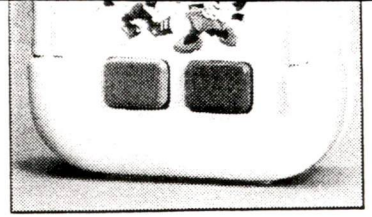
### Shingles expected to afflict baby boomers

The incidence of shingles, an acute central nervous system infection, is expected to double in the next decade as baby boomers age, say experts at a conference today.

Shingles results from reactivation of the varicella-zoster virus (VZV), which enters the body as chicken pox during childhood and remains dormant in nerve cells. In some people, especially over 50, a decline in the immune system allows the viruses to re-emerge and cause shingles. Severe pain affects about a third of sufferers and may last for months or years.

For more information, contact the VZV Research Foundation, 36 E. 72nd St. New York, N.Y. 10021.

By Marilyn Elias, Julie Farren, Dennis Kelly



SOUNDS FOR SMALL EARS:  
Disney Easy Touch tape player

## 1 to 2 years

► **Easy Touch Tape Player** (Mattel, \$31). Designed especially for the smallest music lover. Has big on and off buttons toddlers can work; all other controls are set by an adult. Parents can lock in the volume and tape for safety. Big handle and bumper to protect against thuds.

► **Push 'n' Ride Walker** (Little Tikes, \$20). Oppenheim rates this the best of the year's push and ride-on toys. Low-to-ground, no sharp edges, easy to get on and off. Pleasing (and not annoying) horn.

## If you're game for new games

If games are on your shopping gift list, *Games* magazine has a few suggestions — the best 100 new games of the year.

At the top of the list, *Games'* first-ever Game of the Year. The winner: Trumpet (International Games, \$10). "A very addictive, fairly easy to learn trick-taking card game with elements of board-game play," says senior editor Bill Hochberg.

More than 250 new games published since 1990 were reviewed by *Games'* staffers.

Category winners, in the just released December issue, include:

► **Party games** (tie). Tabloid Teasers (Pressman, \$25); Guessures (Milton Bradley, \$26).

► **Family games**. Stack (Lor-esch Publishing, Box 64, Eustis, Maine 04936; \$17).

► **Trivia games**. Play It By Ear (Rykodisc, \$45, CD player required).

► **Word games**. 'Swoggle (Chieftain Products, 265 Champagne Dr., Downsview, Ontario, M3J2C6 Canada, \$10).