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**BEANS FOR LIFE**  
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If a pregnant woman wears red underwear with a safety pin tucked into it, will it make her newborn child healthier? No self-respecting physician would say so. But the possibility may be worth considering, thanks to a phenomenon scientists call the "Latino health paradox."

As you might suspect, people who don't have regular access to medical care tend to end up sicker than people who do, since it's through regular checkups that you're most likely to catch things like cancer or heart disease before they kill you. And, naturally enough, people who don't have health insurance tend to be sickest of all. So, because Hispanics in the United States are far more likely to be uninsured than the average American, it ought to follow that they're also much less healthy than the average American. But that's the paradox: They aren't. Quite the contrary: Hispanics in the United States are healthier than the rest of the country. *Far* healthier, in fact. According to surveys by David Hayes-Bautista, a professor at UCLA who has conducted some of the most authoritative work on the matter, the rate of heart disease among California Latinos is actually lower than for the population as a whole--this, despite the fact that Latinos are more likely to be overweight and smoke (both major risk factors for heart disease). Latinos are also less likely to have strokes or suffer from cancer. By better avoiding heart attacks, strokes, and cancer--the three leading causes of death in the United States--Latinos enjoy unusually long life expectancies. A Latina woman living in the United States, for example, will probably live longer than the average American female.

What does this have to do with wearing red underwear when you're pregnant? Well, during lunar or solar eclipses, expectant mothers from Mexico (and some other parts of Latin America) frequently wear bright red panties with a safety pin tucked through them, the result of a tradition dating back to Aztec days. Seems the Aztecs (or maybe the Mayans, depending on whose research you believe) thought the eclipse released energy that could cause birth defects. To ward off its power, pregnant women wouldn't go outside without tying a red string around their waists with an arrowhead attached to it. Eventually, as superstition gave way to comfort, the string and arrowhead evolved into a pair of panties with a safety pin attached. And wouldn't you know it? Hispanic women are less likely to have low-birthweight babies than the average American, even though the average American gets much more sustained--and much better quality--medical care during pregnancy.

Of course, nobody seriously thinks this has anything to do with underwear, safety pins, or, for that matter, the alignment of the solar system. But something about being Latino obviously makes you relatively healthy, at least when it comes to heart disease and certain types of cancer. Genetics could play a role, given the well-known links between ethnicity and disease. (Think African Americans and sickle-cell anemia or Jews and Tay-Sachs disease.) But the Latino health "advantage" seems to dissipate over time;

the longer a Latino has been in the United States, the more likely he or she is to suffer from the same health problems as other Americans. As a result, most researchers believe some cultural factor must be at work, too--i.e., something that has to do with growing up in a Latino family or community and engaging in its customs, rather than having a specific genetic trait. The most likely candidate seems to be diet, perhaps something as simple as eating a lot of beans, which are high in fiber and other nutrients linked to better coronary health.

Unfortunately, not everybody is so eager to unravel this mystery. Hayes-Bautista, for one, says that liberal activists frequently try to downplay findings about Latinos' good health, which they fear could undercut arguments for expanding health coverage to the uninsured (who, in Southern California, are predominantly Hispanic). It's not an implausible assessment, I suppose, given the difficulty of rallying support for government-subsidized health insurance; but there have to be better ways of helping the uninsured than covering up information that might make all of us healthier, particularly since healthier people means less spent on health care, which means more financial resources for everybody.

Alas, a much more serious political challenge to studies of ethnic health has emerged this year, in the form of Proposition 54. The measure, which will appear on the same October ballot with the proposed recall of Governor Gray Davis, would forbid the state--or any institution that relies upon state funding--from collecting information sorted by race. Although the initiative does contain an exception for the collection of certain medical information, it's so narrowly defined that it would apply mainly to clinical trials of drugs, not the sort of generalized population data upon which public health studies rely. The result, according to the physicians rallying against it, would be sheer havoc. "It would stop my research dead in its tracks," says Esteban Burchard, a physician-researcher at the University of California, San Francisco, who specializes in the effects of asthma on the Hispanic population.

The mastermind behind the initiative is Ward Connerly, the same man who six years ago organized the successful California initiative banning affirmative action in state-funded institutions. Connerly sees this latest ballot measure, which he calls the "racial privacy" initiative, as merely the next step to move California "beyond race--to stop living on the hyphen." Its approval, Connerly told *Time* magazine, could eventually lead to a nationwide backlash against "shuffling people into little boxes and tables." Maybe. Or, maybe because it will eliminate data collection about (among other things) cancer clusters that affect particular ethnic groups, more people will wind up in a different sort of box--the oblong kind. When it comes to letting politics get in the way of good science, sometimes the right and left have more in common than meets the eye.