My daughter has had several urinary tract infections. She is only 4 years old, and I am concerned. The doctor does not appear concerned.

Little girls are more prone to urinary tract infections (UTIs) than boys, because their urethra (the tube from the bladder) is shorter and allows bacteria to ascend into the bladder more easily. Urinary tract infection is not uncommon, and in the under-6 age group about 3 to 7 percent of girls get infected. This compares to about 1 to 2 percent of boys.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends in children under 2 years of age that after a first UTI, a diagnostic imaging of the bladder and urinary tract should be done to rule out a condition whereby urine reverses up the tubes coming from the kidneys (ureter). This is called vesico-ureteral reflux, and is present in about 30 to 40 percent of children with UTI. If it is diagnosed, usually prophylactic antibiotics (i.e., daily antibiotics, even when not infected) are prescribed. Recent evidence suggests such antibiotic treatment may actually cause antibiotic resistance and may not provide a lot of protection. It may be that the degree of reflux is a factor that has to be considered. Of course, an acute infection needs treatment.

Evidence exists that youngsters may not completely empty their bladders, which could also contribute to infection.

Some little pointers that may be helpful are the following:

- Check with your doctor to be sure your daughter does not have pinworms. Irritation from their presence may result in scratching, which may play a role.
- Be sure she has learned from you to practice good bathroom hygiene.
- Encourage the drinking of lots of water. Cranberry juice in particular can be good to drink as well, as it contains elements that diminish the risk of urinary tract infections.

If the X-rays show serious reflux, you should have your child see a pediatric urologist.

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While this column is provided as a service to our readers, Drs. Landless and Handysides unfortunately cannot enter into personal and private communication with our readers. We recommend that you consult with your personal physician on all matters of your health.