
By ACSH Staff — September 28, 2004

A Review of the Greatest Unfounded Health Scares of Recent Times


Introduction

H. L. Mencken once said that the whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety), by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary. Unfounded health scares, for instance.

Since its founding in 1978 the American Council on Science and Health has been dedicated to separating real, proven health risks such as cigarettes from unfounded health scares based on questionable, hypothetical, or even nonexistent scientific evidence.

This report summarizes the most noteworthy scares of the past half-century. In each case we review the charges made against a given product or substance or even against an entire community. We discuss the basis for the charges, the reactions of the public and the media, and the actual facts as to what risk (if any) ever existed. We describe what the most credible scientific studies had to say on each topic.
The scares are presented in chronological order, arranged according to the year in which each became a major public issue. We have chosen these scares because each received widespread public attention in its day and each followed its own course to closure in terms of public and regulatory response. For the same reason we have decided not to discuss certain current scares, such as the furor over breast implants, for which the final chapter has yet to be written.

Some of the scares examined here led to products or substances being banned. Some led to financial and economic disasters for the producers and processors of the falsely accused products. In other cases, after an initial panic, consumers shrugged off their fears. It is interesting to note that the decisions to ban or to forget generally depended not on the relative magnitude of the risk but on the perceived role the products in question played in consumers daily lives. In some cases a very small risk was exaggerated, or the risk was not compared with the benefits to be derived from the substance in question.

In other cases the available evidence showed no risk to human health, and the people making the charges knew or should have known this all along. Widespread public fears and concerns over matters of health and safety are not new to our era, of course. But what makes these particular scares unique in comparison with the panics of earlier times is that these specifically involved the products of technology, rather than the natural plagues that claimed so many lives in the past.

Often initiated by environmental or consumer organizations and fueled by modern mass media, these scares emerged at a time when Americans enjoyed better health, an ever-increasing life span, a higher standard of living, and a greater scientific understanding of the causes of human death and disease than ever before.

As you read this report, you will see common themes and patterns emerge in the accounts of the scares:

¢ The indiscriminate presumption that the results of laboratory tests involving rodents force-fed (usually via stomach tubes) huge doses of a given substance can be extrapolated to show that the tested substance causes cancer in humans.

¢ Ignorance of the basic principle of toxicology, the dose makes the poison, as consumers fret over the presence of even a single molecule of a substance that is not hazardous to humans unless it is consumed in large amounts.

¢ The acceptance implicit or explicit of the United Nations-conceived precautionary principle, which states, where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent degradation. 1 In other words, all that matters is whether a substance or a technology may do harm. If the risk of harm cannot be ruled out, then the risky product or activity should not be permitted.

¢ The fear of synthetic chemicals, even when some of those same substances exist abundantly, without causing harm, in nature. These themes and patterns were all present in the first of our scares, the infamous cranberry scare of 1959. And they continued to pop up in almost every scare of the next three decades, reaching their zenith with the great Alar scare of 1989. The response to
scares in the post-Alar era has been more muted. This may be due to public overload and to growing skepticism in the face of regular frontpage health warnings, such as the Center for Science in the Public Interest’s periodic admonitions against Chinese food, movie-theater popcorn, and other popular gustatory diversions.

The purpose of this report is not, of course, merely to reflect on modern society’s propensity to fear the unfamiliar. This collection of scare stories is meant to serve as a cautionary tale of a different kind. Scares that focus on trivial or nonexistent risks and the media blitzes and public panics that follow may serve to divert scarce resources away from real, significant public health risks. In this report we intend to show just how the American public has been manipulated by certain segments of the media, by a handful of scientists outside the scientific mainstream, and by a larger coterie of activists and government regulators, all of whom have, whether intentionally or not, frightened the public with hypothetical risks.

What we need is responsible, balanced, scientific reporting. Journalists must become more knowledgeable about science (and scientific reporting) so that they and we can avoid the sort of media blitzes and scares discussed in this report. In short, if we are to achieve the goal of providing consumers with an understanding of science and of the real health risks they can incur we need to bridge the gap between journalism and science.

It is ACSH’s hope that after reading this report, you, as a consumer, will carefully consider the next headlined scare that comes along that you will stop to determine critically whether the headline describes a real or a trivial risk. Remember that the worries such headlines can cause may be more dangerous than the risks themselves. Remember, too, that contrary to the assertions of hobgoblins, technology is making our world safer.

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Introduction 1. The Cranberry Scare of 1959
2. DDT, 1962
3. Cyclamates, 1969
4. DES in Beef, 1972
5. Nitrites, 1972
6. Red Dye Number 2, 1976
7. Saccharin, 1977
8. Hair Dyes, 1977
9. Tris, 1977
10. Love Canal, 1978
11. Three Mile Island, 1979
12. Asbestos in Hair Dryers, 1979
13. 2,4,5-T, 1979
15. Times Beach, 1982
16. EDB, 1983
17. Alar, 1989
18. Electric Blankets, 1989
19. Video Display Terminals, 1989
20. Benzene in Perrier, 1990
22. Asbestos in Schools, 1993
23. Cellular Phones, 1993
24. Perchloroethylene in a Harlem School, 1997
25. Vaccines and Autism, 1998-
27. PCBs in Farmed Salmon, 2003-4
28. Not-Quite-Great Unfounded Health Scares

Conclusions

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