Does everything around us—food, air, water, consumer products—cause cancer or some other dread disease? You would think so, if you believed the cascade of health scares we witnessed during 2007.

Sure, there are real health concerns—threats such as AIDS, smoking, the potential for a pandemic of influenza—but that's what makes the bogus scares we read about almost daily (and resultant demands for government action) so disturbing.

¢ Take the current hysteria over plastic toys. Activists claim the chemical plasticizer phthalate used to make rubber duckies and other plastic items seeps out of toys when kids put them in their mouths and thus leaves them at risk of cancer and other illnesses. California recently went so far as to ban this plasticizer chemical, and California Sen. Dianne Feinstein is introducing legislation to extend the ban nationally. All this, despite the fact there is no evidence whatsoever that phthalates adversely affect the health of either children or adults.

Yet such regulatory actions have consequences for us all, in higher costs and the introduction of replacement technologies that may themselves be less thoroughly tested than the feared chemicals they replace.

¢ On another front in the war against plastic, a number of environmental groups are terrifying people about the safety of plastic bottles and containers, arguing they contain a chemical that will leach into food and water and cause dire health consequences. Even the Environmental Protection Agency admits this scare is baseless, but the activists persist, with one advocate claiming that using plastic containers "is like putting a time bomb into the organs of your baby."

¢ While most of this year's cancer scares raise fears about children's health in order to boost support for chemical bans, an ongoing scare about vaccines is not only baseless but actually increases the risk to a children's health.

The charge that the preservative thimerosal in vaccines causes autism has caused a truly frightening number of parents to refuse vaccinations for their kids, leaving them at risk of traditional infectious diseases, which are anything but bogus. Despite widespread media attention to the alleged causal link, scientists worldwide have repeatedly rejected the myth of vaccines causing autism.

¢ If you believed every health scare you read in 2007, you would also be convinced that lipstick was toxic (an activist group published a report called "The Poison Kiss" claiming that lipstick has high levels of lead it does not), that office printers caused lung disease by releasing ultra-fine particles...
particles, and that a bouquet of imported roses contains so many chemicals that it might just do
you in (watch for this baseless scare to pop up again on Valentine's Day).

Are health scares inevitable? Yes, in a sense they are, because health is a highly emotional issue
(particularly when it pertains to children). It is very easy for irrational fears to take hold when the
alleged toxin is some hostile, invisible agent like "chemicals." There seems to be a human
tendency to fear things we do not see and do not understand.

As we inevitably start a whole new year of public health hysteria in 2008, we should remember that
falling for scares and passing laws because of them wastes time and resources and increases
costs for us all.

So take the scare du jour with a grain of salt without worrying too much about the fact that salt can
also be toxic in a high enough dose.


Links