

Plastic Hysteria Strikes Again UPDATED

By ACSH Staff — April 24, 2008

This piece *first appeared in the* ^[1] [Washington Times](#) ^[1].

A new health scare -- over the safe and useful plastic component, bisphenol-A (BPA) -- has taken wing, fomented by the usual suspects: "experts" in rat toxicology working with alarmist, chemical-hating "environmental" activists and self-serving media scaremongers. Soon, we know all too well, will come the plaintiffs' lawyers to "protect" the public from the non-existent (but lucrative) threats lurking in our plastic bottles.

Once again, our environmental stewards have ventured into an area to which they are ill-suited: human health. The new draft report on the chemical, issued by the National Toxicology Program (NTP, a branch of the EPA), is being trumpeted by greeniacs everywhere as if a cure for cancer had been discovered or malaria eradicated.

The facts buried in the report are quite the opposite of the newspaper headlines. There is no cause for concern, much less alarm, over the tiny exposures we face from plastic bottles made with BPA. The hysteria, aggravated by reports of moms nationwide throwing out "toxic" baby bottles with the number 7 on them, is based (as usual) on rat tests and "general themes" of toxicity, rather than on anything approaching scientific evidence.

The NTP panel found that high doses of BPA caused illnesses in rats and mice. To this unsurprising news, they helpfully added that some researchers are concerned that low doses might have effects on embryonic rodents as well. Never mind that it's always the same small group that discovers these "low-dose effects." Mainstream scientists strongly doubt the existence of such hypothetical effects -- if large doses don't harm, how can small ones do so? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that makes no sense, just someone acquainted with the basic principle of toxicology that the dose makes the poison.

Please take note: there is no evidence at all -- none -- that human beings of any age or developmental stage have been harmed in any way by common exposure to BPA. Even workers using the chemical in manufacturing have not been shown to have suffered any harm. The fact that rodents suffer at high doses of the chemical has nothing to do with human health: The same animal tests performed on natural chemicals we eat and drink every day give the same "toxicity" results. If we consistently banned substances based on these tests, we'd be left with nothing at all, natural or manmade. And the presence of tiny amounts of BPA in our bodies and tissues does not mean that it causes us any harm -- although you would never know that from the news stories describing the "chemical soup" we live in.

The NTP panel exposes its bias by proclaiming that there is some evidence of "hormonal effects" in workers from BPA. When one delves into the sources of this assertion, it seems that the

evidence shows no such thing at all. The only "evidence" the panelists cite derives from rodent tests -- and now, even the EPA has declared such tests to be unreliable for human health risk assessment.

This alarmist tripe follows the recent uproar about contaminated toys from China. But while that concern was actually about excessive lead content -- a regulatory rather than a public-health issue -- the media and the activists managed to provoke fear about plasticizer phthalates in toys as well, and they have successfully gotten several states to ban these perfectly safe chemicals -- over nothing. Again, the source of the "evidence" comes from one or two labs whose careers have been built on fomenting baseless chemical fears.

This new scare is part and parcel of the "back to nature" school of public health. There is no substance to the dogma promulgated by technophobes that "natural is good, synthetic is bad." All of the great epidemic infections we have conquered are of "natural" origin -- and we beat them with technology. The same folks who warn us against BPA -- and phthalates in toys and all the other phony threats -- tend to oppose gene-splicing technology, which holds the promise of relieving food scarcity now threatening world health and stability. But they'd rather rant about non-existent health threats they invent than deal with real-life problems. They have been warning us about the dangers of cosmetics, French fries and vaccines -- while ignoring real problems, such as smoking and underutilization of interventions such as colonoscopy and adult immunizations.

And where are the experts in human disease causation and prevention here? Why are the NIH and the NCI mute when these scares grab the headlines? These groups are supposed to know about human health -- yet public and media attention is grabbed by the experts in rat illness every time. I must paraphrase Edmund Burke: the only requirement for the ignorant to triumph is for the informed to remain silent. That's what is happening now, as voices of alarm become ever more shrill.

Gilbert Ross, M.D., is executive and medical director of the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH.org [2], HealthFactsAndFears.com [3]).

See ACSH's full report on [The Facts About Bisphenol A](#) [4].

UPDATE: After a letter to the editor from Dr. David Carpenter dismissive of the piece above and of ACSH in general (as industry-tainted), Dr. Ross replied to Carpenter, and his letter (second below) [appeared simultaneously](#) [5] with another, similar anti-ACSH letter, from Consumers Union, publishers of the overly-respected *Consumer Reports*:

Putting plastic in perspective

The Washington Times does consumers no favors by publishing Gilbert Ross' pro-industry dismissal of the health dangers of drinking from hard plastic (polycarbonate) bottles ("Plastic hysteria strikes again," Commentary, April 24) without also informing consumers that Dr. Ross' serious-sounding group, the American Council on Science and Health, gets considerable funding from the chemical industry. In fact, ACSH's funders are a virtual who's who of the nation's biggest chemical companies, including American Cyanamid, Monsanto, Pfizer, Archer Daniels Midland, Ciba-Geigy, Ethyl, Exxon, Chevron, Dow, DuPont and Union Carbide -- just to name a handful -- according to the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest.

This biased article completely ignores a broader category of health concerns, including those related to bisphenol-A (BPA) and phthalates in toys and other products used to feed and care for children, about all of which the National Institute of Health's National Toxicology Program has recently issued warnings. You would have helped consumers to determine the veracity of the speaker by letting them know the money behind the voice.

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Contrary to the insinuations of Dr. David O. Carpenter, my organization, the American Council on Science and Health, accepts only no-strings-attached donations ("Plastics caution," Letters, Saturday). We will accept support from almost anyone, including foundations, corporations and a growing number of individuals -- as long as it is understood that the contributions will have no effect on the high quality of our research and conclusions, which are published in peer-reviewed journals.

Our 400-member advisory panel -- made up of scientists, physicians and academicians -- serves on a voluntary basis. These facts explain why, contrary to Dr. Carpenter's assertions, our science-based position on bisphenol-A (BPA) is immune to the "industry funding" smear so often resorted to by those with no other arguments to support their theories.

In fact, our position is at odds with that of the plastics industry itself. The spokespeople for the makers of BPA have acquiesced to the media and regulatory storm provoked by the recent government report. They have chosen to "call for more research" rather than simply to call a spade a spade; that is, pointing out that the report's "concerns" were based on rodent tests, of no relevance to the health of humans of any age.

We published a report evaluating all the scientific information on BPA in 2004. This report was written by an expert in the field and peer-reviewed by nine volunteer academicians with no ax to grind. Our conclusion was that BPA is safe to use as we've been using it since the 1950s. The current uproar derives from inappropriate, unscientific extrapolations from "low-dose" rat tests to human health. If these tests are to be the benchmark for environmental "safety," we would be left with none of our commonly used consumer goods and precious few of our foods, as well. Even the EPA has pulled back from such judgments. As but one example: Peanut butter contains trace

levels of the animal carcinogen aflatoxin. Will Dr. Carpenter and his colleagues' next scare involve PB&J?

Dr. Carpenter's spurious linkage of the "risks" of BPA with those of smoking are clearly alarmist: While no one has ever been harmed by BPA, the toll of cigarettes in our country alone reaches into the millions.

The substitutes for BPA are much less studied and will likely be subject to a similar scare campaign in the near future. If BPA is banned, the American consumer will pay the price. Meanwhile, scientists who have spoken out on this hysteria -- yes, it's hysteria, not merely "concern" now -- are apparently to be hounded by Congress as well as by Dr. Carpenter and his minions. However, I wouldn't retract a word from my Commentary, as the scientific facts are behind me.

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