Unfounded Health Scares

By ACSH Staff — December 23, 2008

In recent years, Americans have been scared to death by strident claims of "toxins" and "carcinogens" lurking in our environment. But 2008 seems to have produced its own unique bumper crop of silly scares. These fears usually stem from high dose studies on laboratory rodents and ignore the basic toxicological principle that "only the dose makes the poison." Here are the top 10 baseless scares of the year:

1. Phthalates are chemicals used to soften plastic and have been used for decades to make rubber ducks and other soft plastic toys. Phthalates are also used in cosmetics and shampoos, lotions and other plastic products. There is absolutely no evidence that phthalate-containing products pose any risk to human health -- but that did not stop California from banning most of these chemicals, and causing a nationwide panic. We saw headlines like "Plastic shower curtains can mean curtains for you." These claimed health risks are totally bogus and based on rodent data.

2. Bisphenol-A (BPA) is a common component of hard plastic found in everything from baby and water bottles, sippy cups, soda can liners and more. Again using animal data, activists claimed that BPA was linked to breast and prostate cancer, obesity and reproductive problems. The panic became so intense that Nalgene decided not to use BPA to make its polycarbonate water bottles. Canada responded to the scare by banning BPA in baby bottles. According to the FDA and other scientific groups, there is no scientific evidence that BPA causes health problems at the low levels to which we are exposed.

3. Cell phones, according to the director if the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, might cause brain cancer -- a totally unscientific conclusion, but one which generated headlines like "Cancer Doc Tells Colleagues to Lay off Cell Phones." Cell phones pose no danger to human health, Definitely a wrong number.

4. Coffee shrinks breasts, scientists from Sweden claimed, adding helpfully that "breasts will get smaller but they will not disappear."

5. "Toxic Bras" were in the news as activists claimed that Victoria Secret lingerie contains formaldehyde. Reporters noted that this was a "secret that women needed to know."

6. Pharmaceuticals in the drinking water generated headlines like "Tap Water has Traces of Medicine" when indeed these traces have no implications for health. These days we can find traces of anything in anything with our sensitive technology.

7. "Toxic toys" have become an annual holiday time scare -- with claims that lead, cadmium, arsenic and other "harmful chemicals" are showing up. In reality, the toys on the market are safe
because there are strict government standards already in place.

8. Vaccines causing autism is an oldie but goody scare that reared its head again this year. But the reality is that not only are childhood vaccines safe but they are necessary to protect individual children and the larger population from dangerous diseases.

9. Dioxins in Irish pork generated headlines about "contaminated meat" -- when in reality the levels were so low they could not possibly adversely affect human health.

10. Granite countertops were under scrutiny as a source of allegedly dangerous radiation -- another example of the media highlighting scares with no scientific basis as a way of attracting attention in a crowded market.

When it comes to health scares, consumers should eat, drink and be wary of the scares that will start up again in 2009.