

The Biggest Unfounded Health Scares of 2010

By ACSH Staff — December 30, 2010

As we begin a new year, the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) would first like to try and slay the demons and hobgoblins of the past year. We do this each New Year's Eve by making a list of the top unfounded health scares of the outgoing year. These bouts of hysteria are prompted by many different things. But what they have in common is that there's no scientific evidence to back up the alarms being sounded.

Here's our top ten:

1.) **Bisphenol-A (BPA)** has been used for more than 50 years in the manufacture of everything from life-saving medical devices to water bottles, eyeglass lenses and CDs. It more than earned the unfounded scare of the year award. Not only does BPA not threaten health it actually promotes public health when used as a can liner to protect us from otherwise dangerous food-borne diseases, like botulism. Yet seven states now have instituted a ban on the use of BPA in the sale and manufacture of baby bottles and sipping cups.

Babies exposed to chemicals? Unacceptable say many activists. But here is the truth: BPA has never posed a health threat to children or adults. Regulatory bodies around the world including our own FDA have confirmed that. The fear of BPA is a perfect example of the fact, as psychiatrists have pointed out, that people have long feared things they do not understand and cannot see and adding a concern for children to the mix only raises the fear level more.

2.) **E-cigarettes (electronic cigarettes)**, which are an odorless and flameless clean nicotine delivery system, stand accused of containing carcinogens and of being as dangerous as real cigarettes.

But e-cigarettes pose little or no harm compared to real cigarettes. What is harmful about traditional cigarette smoking is the products of combustion that are created when the smoker lights up. Nicotine, in itself, although highly addictive, isn't particularly harmful its toxicity is about the same as caffeine. E-cigarettes give smokers the nicotine fix they want without the frightening chemical mix produced by the combustion in traditional cigarettes.

So-called public health and anti-smoking groups who condemn the e-cigarettes as health hazards similar to traditional smoking are doing a great disservice to the tens of millions of addicted cigarette smokers in America.

3.) **Atrazine**, one of the most effective and the second most widely used herbicide, has been accused of causing everything from cancer to birth defects. Although our Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has long defended atrazine's safety, this year the agency, under pressure from activists, began yet another re-evaluation of atrazine's safety profile.

Atrazine's greatest foe has been a professor from the University of California at Berkeley who seems to have a personal vendetta against the chemical and its manufacturer, Syngenta. The bottom line is that no study has ever shown that atrazine's presence in water at any level has ever caused ill health in humans.

4.) **Phthalates**, a group of chemicals which have long been added to polyvinyl chloride (PVC) to soften plastics, are found in myriad products including rubber duckies, intravenous medical tubing, shower curtains, personal care items like hairspray and body lotion and more. Several activist anti-chemical groups have made it their mission to incriminate phthalates as a deadly poison responsible for various health maladies, including developmental and reproductive effects following fetal exposure. Some scientists, like the University of Rochester's Dr. Shanna Swan, have literally built their careers on searching for health threats from phthalates.

But a vast amount of scientific data already exists on the safety of phthalates, and currently there is no known adverse health effects from the use of phthalates in consumer products. This group of chemicals has been used safely for decades and has been deemed safe by health regulatory authorities around the world.

5.) **Sugar-sweetened soda** is now taking the rap as the major cause of obesity in the U.S. The New York City Health Department this year launched a campaign called Pouring on the Pounds detailing what they see as the adverse health effects of drinking sugar-sweetened soda.

But the reality is that soda is not the culprit in our obesity crisis. Too many calories from any source (and too little exercise) are to blame. Blaming sugar-sweetened soda for causing obesity is a simple solution to a complex problem and it is simply wrong. By the way, if the concern is calories, why hasn't the Health Department recommended that people watching their calories consumed diet soda instead?

6.) **Cosmetics** specifically parabens found in many types of beauty aids are being blamed for having estrogen-like properties which can lead to a risk of breast and other forms of cancer.

Activists have long complained that cosmetics are largely under-regulated and require more federal oversight. The charges against cosmetics come mainly from the anti-chemical activists group Environmental Working Group. But they have no science to back them up. The trace levels of carcinogens (from research based on animal studies only) in cosmetics have never been associated with actual adverse health effects in humans.

7.) **High-fructose corn syrup (HFCS)** has been linked to obesity for many years primarily by extrapolating from studies on rodents. Its presence in soda thus has become another target of the New York City anti-obesity campaign. But even NYU professor Marion Nestle, a notorious food industry critic, writes: I do not think that the study produces convincing evidence of a difference between the effects of HFCS and sucrose on the body weight of rats.

Unfortunately, the media has touted HFCS as an evil product forced upon us by the corn industry, when in reality HFCS is no more or less healthy than any other type of sugar.

8.) **Genetically-modified crops** have long been dubbed Frankenfoods by those who have vilified them. The gene technologies used to yield GM crops stand accused of being a detriment to the

environment and a possible cause of increased rates of cancer and other health catastrophes.

Why? GM farming is an innovation that has allowed millions of people to gain access to food instead of dying from starvation without ever harming one person or animal.

9.) **Vaccines and autism** have been very much on the minds of parents in recent years. Many parents now prevent their children from getting vaccinated against a slew of illnesses fearing that the inoculations may lead to autism.

The hysteria took off after Dr. Andrew Wakefield published a study in *The Lancet* in 1998 linking the MMR vaccine to autism. Dr. Wakefield's study has since been retracted by the publication and repudiated by numerous scientific studies, yet celebrities like Jenny McCarthy, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and Bill Maher continue to use their fame to advance these inaccuracies in the media and scare parents into avoiding vaccines. Much of the anti-vaccine attacks have focused on the mercury-containing preservative thiomersal which was removed from most vaccines years ago.

Vaccines have had a profound beneficial effect on public health by drastically reducing the amount of death and disability from infectious diseases. As Dr. Wakefield's research has demonstrated, the vast majority of reports that link vaccines to serious health maladies do not meet the scientific criteria necessary to attribute causality. In order to protect yourself, your family and your community from the devastating effects that a preventable infection may have, get immunized as soon as possible.

10.) **Mercury in fish** is something pregnant women have been warned about for years, Why? Because it is claimed that its consumption has been associated with a negative impact on children's brain development and other health worries. The EPA has established a reference dose for mercury levels in human blood as well as a list of seafoods that women who are or may become pregnant as well as young children should avoid eating in order to limit their exposure to the toxic metal.

Articles warning against the dangers of mercury consumption from fish make their way into print on a consistent basis. For example, in July 2006, a *Consumer Reports* magazine article advised pregnant women to avoid eating canned tuna for fear that they might expose themselves and their unborn fetuses to unsafe levels of mercury. They issued a follow-up alarmist report recently, but neglected to mention that none of the levels of mercury in their tuna specimens exceeded government limits.

Moreover, as Paracelsus wisely once said, the dose makes the poison, and a fear of mercury poisoning from seafood stems directly from the inability to properly digest this information. Though mercury in high quantities can indeed be toxic, the trace amounts found in conventional seafood causes no harm in humans: The nutritional benefits of eating the recommended amount of fish servings far outweighs any potential health risks that canned tuna may pose. Adequate fish consumption is important for the health of developing fetuses and growing children. Therefore, avoid the metal-phobia mania that has consumed the pages of *Consumer Reports* and other such publications over the past few years, and crack open a fresh tin of some wholesome tuna fish.

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