

# CSPI call for caramel color ban is artificially flavored with misrepresented science

*By ACSH Staff — February 17, 2011*

When ACSH first heard about the [latest push for an FDA ban](#) [1] by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) — this time for the supposed “carcinogen” and caramel coloring byproduct 4-methylimidazole (4-MEI), found in colas — we thought this would be just another one of the activist group’s dead end stories. But alas, it soon made headlines in the [Los Angeles Times](#) [2], [New York Post](#) [3], [Reuters](#) [4], [ABC](#) [5] and over a hundred other venues. CSPI executive director Michael Jacobson is again trying to scare consumers into believing that 4-MEI — found in trace levels in some sodas — can cause cancer in humans. Jacobson claims government studies show that it is linked to increased cancer in mice when administered in ultra-high doses. Sounds scary, doesn’t it? But what CSPI refuses to understand is that just because a chemical causes cancer in some rodents, it doesn’t equate to cancer in humans.

After taking a closer look at the NIH’s assessment of 4-MEI, ACSH’s Dr. Josh Bloom found that even the standard test used to assess potential carcinogenicity — the Ames Test — was negative for the substance. “The doses of 4-MEI required to kill rodents are sky high, something CSPI conveniently glossed over,” he adds. “I am not impressed by any of the toxicity data I have seen.” ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross, who posted a [comment](#) [6] on the ABC News article covering the story, agrees that there is no link between cancer and consumption of 4-MEI from soda:

CSPI wants you to be very afraid, but there is absolutely nothing to fear from this new alarm. The process used to make soda-caramel has been around for about 70 years and 4-MEI has been in it — albeit in tiny quantities — for as long as detection technology precise enough to detect it has existed. At no time has this chemical been linked to any adverse health effects — at least not in humans. ...[S]tudies of workers exposed to 4-MEI at much higher levels than those minuscule quantities detected in standard cola drinkers have found no adverse effects. Moreover, trying to extrapolate high-dose rodent experiments to human health effects is bogus. Mice are not little people even though CSPI would like us to think so.

So not only are these government rodent studies useless, they have been blatantly misrepresented by CSPI, laments ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan.

ACSH’s Jody Manley concurs, pointing out that “Once the media hears soda and ‘carcinogen,’ they are all over it. But the media doesn’t have time to look at the data in detail and will take what CSPI says at face value.” Thankfully, ACSH is here to point out the gaping holes in CSPI’s 4-MEI analysis.

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**Source URL:** <https://www.acsh.org/news/2011/02/17/cspi-call-for-caramel-color-ban-is-artificially-flavored-with-misrepresented-science>

**Links**

[1] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-f-jacobson/caramel-coloring-in-soda-\\_b\\_823639.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-f-jacobson/caramel-coloring-in-soda-_b_823639.html)

[2] <http://www.latimes.com/health/boostershots/la-heb-caramel-coloring-sodas-20110216,0,1190027.story>

[3]

<http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CBsQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww>

[4] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/16/us-soda-caramel-idUSTRE71F71S20110216>

[5] <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/cspi-caramel-coloring-cola-cancer-soft-drink-industry/story?id=12932008>

[6] [http://abcnews.go.com/Health/cspi-caramel-coloring-cola-cancer-soft-drink-](http://abcnews.go.com/Health/cspi-caramel-coloring-cola-cancer-soft-drink-industry/comments?type=user&loginCode=%7B52DEF098-D00E-46EC-B29E-C3A6A1D7E8B8%7D)

[industry/comments?type=user&loginCode=%7B52DEF098-D00E-46EC-B29E-C3A6A1D7E8B8%7D](http://abcnews.go.com/Health/cspi-caramel-coloring-cola-cancer-soft-drink-industry/comments?type=user&loginCode=%7B52DEF098-D00E-46EC-B29E-C3A6A1D7E8B8%7D)