

# The 1st Great Chemical Cancer Scare? Cranberries, Thanksgiving 1959

By Gil Ross — November 23, 2015



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*Fifty-six Years Ago This Month, Americans Panicked Over Cranberries:* the anniversary of the first carcinogen panic of the last century In 1999, we [published the first edition](#) [2] of our classic cancer-scare compendium, "*Facts vs. Fears: A Review of the Greatest Unfounded Health Scares of Recent Times.*" But the Great Cranberry Scare, which created havoc at the worst possible time, remains #1 on the list even today. Our initial booklet covered twenty scares. Unfortunately, too few among the public and the media paid sufficient attention, as the number of health scares in the latest edition of our publication (2004) ballooned to 28.

In November 1959, just days before Thanksgiving, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (the agency that preceded Health and Human Services), Arthur Fleming, set off a national food panic when he announced that domestic cranberry products were contaminated with a weed-killer called aminotriazole. Aminotriazole is a chemical that in huge doses the equivalent of eating 15,000 pounds of cranberries every day for several years was found to cause cancer in laboratory rodents. As a result of the federal warning, schools discarded cranberry products, restaurants changed their menus, supermarkets suspended sales and millions of Americans had Thanksgiving dinner without cranberry sauce. The cranberry scare of 1959 set the stage for decades of completely unnecessary anxiety about trace levels of agricultural chemicals and additives in food, noted Dr. Elizabeth M. Whelan in "*Facts vs. Fears.*" Dr. Whelan, the president of ACSH, and a co-founder of our organization, passed away in September of 2014. An important catalyst in the 1959 cranberry scare was the Delaney Clause, a 1958 amendment to the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act that banned from food any artificial substance that could be shown to cause cancer in lab animals. What the Delaney Clause fails to recognize, explained Dr. Whelan is that lab animals are not little humans. The Delaney Clause also overlooks the fact that many natural substances safely consumed by Americans every day are also high-dose animal carcinogens, added Dr. Whelan. (Our "[Holiday Dinner Menu](#)" [3] expands cogently and clearly on this topic). While animal studies play an important role in identifying potentially toxic or cancer-causing substances (carcinogens), their results often found at extraordinarily high doses cannot be directly

applied to humans. The EPA is aware of this, but they still insist on using these kinds of tests to determine what is and what isn't carcinogenic, despite our petition to them to reconsider this irrelevant paradigm in our peer-reviewed book, "[America's War on 'Carcinogens'](#)"<sup>[4]</sup>". It is of some comfort that there has not been another major food scare since the fiasco over Alar-treated apples in 1989. This suggests and this is good news that chemophobia may be on the wane. However, this may be too optimistic, since the "scare industry" has shifted direction toward trace amounts of chemicals that are found in everyday life. The 40th anniversary of the Great Cranberry Scare should be a reminder to all Americans: Don't get bogged down by the hypothetical hazards cultivated by environmental hysterics and know-nothing celebrities. As the introduction to "*Facts vs. Fears*" reminds us, the great journalist and cynic H. L. Mencken said that the whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety), by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary. Unfounded health scares, for instance.

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[2] <http://acsh.org/2004/09/facts-versus-fears-fourth-edition/>

[3] <http://acsh.org/2014/11/acsh-holiday-dinner-menu/>

[4] [http://www.acsh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/20050126\\_WOCSummary.pdf](http://www.acsh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/20050126_WOCSummary.pdf)