Even putting the words "arsenic" and "baby cereal" in the same sentence is enough to make parents quail. And now the FDA is proposing new regulations on rice products — especially babies' rice cereal — to limit the amount of inorganic arsenic in those products. But will this regulation really do anything except convince parents that there was some problem with the cereal to start with?

There are two main forms of arsenic in foods, organic arsenic, in which arsenic is combined with a carbon-containing compound, and inorganic arsenic, in which it is not. It's only the inorganic type that can be a problem in high amounts. The level proposed is 100 parts per billion (ppb) for infant rice cereals. Why was it necessary to set this level?

When the agency tested 76 samples of baby rice cereal it found that nearly half meet that level already; and in all, 78 percent of them contained only 110 or fewer ppb. Is it really the case that going from 110 ppb to 100 ppb will make a difference? Doubtful.

As we've emphasized in the past, the only real health risk related to rice is its lack of vitamin A, not its arsenic content. And most likely only the people for whom rice is a staple food are the ones who need to be concerned. Of course, if those folks had access to Golden Rice, which has been genetically engineered to provide beta-carotene, a precursor to vitamin A, they wouldn't have to be concerned at all.

Arsenic is a naturally occurring element that is found everywhere — in land and water. And while it's true that very high levels consumed over long periods of time can cause cancer and other ills, it's unreasonable to expect that the minuscule amounts in rice cereal will be a health risk. But in our fear-laden society, there seems to be no attention paid to the fact that it's the dose that makes the poison — really, even for arsenic.