

Scary health stories

By Elizabeth Whelan
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By Elizabeth M. Whelan - If you are a parent (or grandparent) of a young child, you are a target for manipulation by activists (some with scientific degrees) who claim we are surrounded by a sea of chemical "toxins" and "carcinogens." You are easy prey — because you care so deeply about the health and welfare of your babies and children. Purveyors of unfounded health scares know that.

The fearmongers have just about everything going for them. And unless you recognize their manipulative tactics, you will be among their millions of terrified victims.

Here's how they work: They know what psychiatrists have known for many years: human beings are fearful of substances that are unknown, unfamiliar — and invisible. It's just human nature to postulate there are hostile, unseen agents out there that are going to get you — like the boogeyman under the bed at night. What you cannot see can be downright scary. And that is what the "toxic terrorists" count on. You will act to ensure the safety of your child — whether or not there is a real risk.

Take the example of a scare story in the news this week:

An article in the current Pediatrics medical journal claims baby lotions, powders and shampoo contain a chemical known as phthalates, absorbed by babies through their skin, leaving them at risk of disease and disabilities.

Phthalates are chemicals that have been used for more than 50 years in a variety of products — for example, as chemical stabilizers in personal care products or as plastic softeners in rubber duckies, shower curtains and medical devices. Phthalates are invisible, unfamiliar (who can pronounce the word, much less spell it correctly?), and totally unknown to almost every parent. So when parents read that phthalates show up in the urine of babies exposed to powders, lotions

and shampoos (as the Pediatrics article stated), they understandably panic.

And when an activist like Mark Schapiro — author of "Exposed: The Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Products" — claims "American infants are ... sucking on phthalate-contaminated teething rings, ingesting toxins directly into their still-developing, vulnerable bodies," you have the perfect storm: purportedly hostile, invisible agents attacking your baby. The scaremongers have got you — all because you are a loving, caring parent.

Contrast the activist scare about phthalates with scientific reality:

(1) Given the sophistication of analytic chemistry today, we can find traces of any and all chemicals — natural and synthetic — to which we (or our babies) are exposed. Just because you can measure the presence of a chemical in blood or urine is no reason to believe the chemical poses harm. Thus there is no surprise that phthalates can be detected in trace amounts in a baby's urine — but it is meaningless healthwise.

(2) There is no evidence whatsoever — not even a hint — of health problems from phthalates in any consumer products used by children or adults. That is the conclusion of esteemed scientists from the Food and Drug Administration, Consumer Product Safety Commission, and universities around the world — and a blue-ribbon panel on phthalates and health chaired by former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop. The issue has been addressed and studied extensively. There are more than 1,000 articles on phthalates in the scientific literature. The claimed health risk is totally bogus, based exclusively on results of high-dose rodent experiments.

If one were to assume that phthalates should be regarded as dangerous because vast quantities can make rodents sick, we would also have to fear the myriad natural foods (like mushrooms, table pepper, coffee and nutmeg) that contain chemicals that cause cancer in rodents — as plenty of all-natural chemicals do,

without any corresponding illness in humans. Similarly, the claim that phthalates "disrupt hormones" is pure speculation and without scientific merit.

The scare tactics on phthalates worked like a charm recently in California, since Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger banned most forms of phthalates, declaring: "We must take this action to protect our children. These chemicals threaten the health and safety of our children at critical stages of their development." Building on this momentum, Sen. Diane Feinstein, California Democrat, introduced legislation to ban phthalates nationwide. These regulatory moves will do absolutely nothing to promote the health of children. They will only remove from the market safe, useful products.

How should we as consumers and scientists react to these bogus scares, which are increasingly targeting worried parents?

We have a clear choice: The easy way would be to tolerate this insidious manipulation and agree to "do something" to eliminate the bogus risk — no matter the cost. If we continue in this way, we will squander public health resources by targeting nonrisks, and we will literally be dismantling our technologically-sophisticated society, demolishing our enviably high standard of living. After banning rubber duckies, what will be next?

But if we listen to scientists dealing in the facts about such alarmism, we can recognize this manipulation for what it is — and reject it. This will take extraordinary leadership by scientists, who need to step forward and say, in essence, "I understand your fears. We all care deeply about the health of our children. But this is fear that has no basis in reality."

Obviously, scientists in California did not speak up to declare as bogus the scare about phthalates — and manipulation through fear prevailed. We can only hope science will prevail when similar national legislation is considered and that any legislation to protect us from nonexistent risks are rejected.

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