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## Do You Dare To Eat A Peach? Or an apple, or a grape? The fruit panic was a lesson about terrorism -- and living with risk

By [MARGARET CARLSON](#)[PRINT THIS ARTICLE](#)[BACK TO SEARCH](#)

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Modern life seems ever more terrifying. A passenger jet explodes over Scotland. The wife of the captain of the U.S.S. Vincennes leaps out of her van an instant before a pipe bomb blows it up on a San Diego street. A Japanese Red Army terrorist, allegedly heading for a Navy recruiting station in Manhattan, is nabbed on the New Jersey Turnpike with shrapnel bombs. Bookstores in Berkeley are fire bombed for selling Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

Now it's fruit. The terrorist who telephoned the U.S. embassy in Santiago on March 2 seemed to understand that, as Alfred Hitchcock showed in *The Birds*, the most deep-seated fears are engendered when the benign suddenly turns menacing. The saboteur had no explosives to rig, no bomb-sniffing dogs to elude, no metal detector to foil -- only some fruit and a little poison. And that was more than enough. Just two little grapes were found to have been injected with cyanide -- not enough, it turns out, to give a toddler a stomachache -- and the country was thrown into a panic.

Those two punctured grapes, discovered on March 12 in a shipment unloaded from the cargo ship *Almeria Star* in Philadelphia, forced millions of Americans to ask themselves, however fleetingly, whether to take a risk by eating. That the fruit at the salad bar, the peach in Johnny's lunch box, the raspberries in the refrigerator, could be poisonous turned the world upside down. Could the stuff of vitamin C and Cezanne still lifes be hazardous? Was an apple a day more likely to bring the doctor than keep him away? What was the world coming to?

Traditional risk assessment weighs the magnitude of the danger against the probability it will occur. The chance of dying from a cyanide-laced piece of fruit was infinitesimally small compared to the possibility of being run over by the proverbial bus on the way to the supermarket. But rather than issue a warning to examine fruit carefully, the Food and Drug Administration impounded 2 million crates of fruit at airports and docks in Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Miami -- a still life of waste -- and advised consumers not to eat any Chilean fruit, which includes most of the peaches, blueberries, blackberries, melons, green apples, pears and plums on the market this time of year. As Japan and Canada followed the U.S. lead, an additional \$4 million worth of fruit en route from Chile was held up, and \$15 million more was stockpiled on the docks in Chile. So far, 20,000 Chilean food workers have been fired, and 200,000 more jobs were in jeopardy.

Some, particularly the Chileans, whose estimated \$600 million fruit and vegetable industry was crippled, felt the U.S. had vastly overreacted. FDA Commissioner Frank Young explained his action with the statement that he would rather be "safe than sorry," and many Americans no doubt agreed with him.

Ironically, it was the Government's failure to apply a safe-rather-than- sorry

standard to another fruit that set off a similar fruit frenzy a week earlier. It started with a report from the Natural Resources Defense Council, a nonprofit environmental group, that apples treated with the growth regulator Alar were soaking small children with dangerously high levels of daminozide, a possible carcinogen. 60 Minutes aired the story, and actress Meryl Streep, now a leading lady in the fight against pesticides, was quickly booked solid on talk shows and Capitol Hill. Soon apples were ordered removed from school cafeterias in New York City, then Los Angeles and Chicago. Said one school official: "It was overreaction and silliness carried to the point of stupidity." Kenneth W. Kizer, director of the California department of health services, said the panic was creating a "toxic bogeyman." Still, a number of school systems across the country followed suit. Signs were posted above produce bins coast to coast pointing out the Alar-free apples. Makers of products like apple juice, a staple of the preschool diet, sent out releases saying their brands were safe. Washington State, which grows 50% of the nation's apples, faces huge economic losses.

It was at the height of the apple panic that the Chilean fruit phobia began. The first phone call to the U.S. embassy in Santiago was followed by a more serious one on March 9. The caller said he had read in a Santiago paper that his threat was being treated as a hoax. He warned, he said, it was no hoax. Fifty FDA inspectors were dispatched to the Almeria Star as it docked in Philadelphia. They set up tables along the pier and began examining 1,200 cases of grapes for softness, discoloration and the telltale welds caused by punctures. By Sunday, 150 inspectors, more than 15% of the FDA's field force, were eyeballing grapes at the Tioga Marine Terminal. Fifteen suspicious bunches of grapes -- 2% of the nearly 400,000 crates examined -- were sent off to the lab. Three of those grapes were punctured; two had traces of cyanide.

That the cyanide was still present in the fruit after the two-week boat trip was disturbing. Acid in grapes quickly decomposes the poison, so the original amount injected could have been much greater. After an early-Monday meeting, Young decided to pull all Chilean fruit off the market.

At that point a generalized fear of fruit swept the country. National Restaurant Association spokesman Jeffrey Prince said, "We learned to our relief that Granny Smith apples were not treated with Alar, only to learn to our horror that they were included in the Chilean ban. It seems you can't win for losing." Health-conscious restaurants that had banished artery-clogging red meat, butter, eggs and cheese from their menus now had to remove the fruit plate.

Grocery-store managers had to cope first with customers who did not want red apples, then with customers who did not want red grapes and then with customers who did not want any fruit at all. The country's largest chains, including Sloan's, Publix and Jewel, stopped selling fruit from Chile. Grocers had to come up with a returns policy like their department-store counterparts. At most establishments it was money back, no questions asked.

Poison control centers were inundated with calls. Jack W. Lipscomb, director of the poison control center at a major Chicago hospital, said that anybody who had eaten a grape in the past three days and had a headache thought the culprit was cyanide. "We advised them of the fast-acting nature of cyanide, which takes effect in one or two minutes," he said. "Basically, if they're still alive and kicking to get to the phone, they probably don't have anything to worry about."

That did not stop the Oregon state police from embarking on a high-speed chase to overtake a school bus transporting a child whose mother had inadvertently packed grapes in her daughter's lunch box.

While the grape panic and apple scare merged in the public consciousness, they were actually quite different: the punctured-grapes incident was an example of

Government action in the face of an intentional poisoning; Alar on apples was an instance of Government inaction following a scientific dispute over risk vs. benefit in the case of a particular chemical agent.

But they are alike in one key respect: the two incidents demonstrate how the public increasingly demands a risk-free society -- whatever the cost, and whether or not they can protect themselves. Immune from the ills that ail less affluent cultures, America has the luxury of fretting over the little things. It is the particular indulgence of baby boomers who believe that restraint of one's appetites, daily workouts and a lot of oat bran can delay aging indefinitely. To health-and-fitness puritans, sagging flesh and excess weight represent an inexcusable lack of vigilance. Accustomed to success in translating their private anxieties into public activity -- protesting a war, toppling a President, taking over universities -- they turned to perfecting their immediate environment in the 1970s, pressing the Government for help and suing anyone who did not share their finicky obsessions. Safety regulations multiplied, tort law boomed, liability-insurance rates soared.

The fruit frenzy also taps into the media's fascination with harm with a personal angle. In October 1987 baby Jessica McClure, trapped in a well, grabbed the attention of the global village, garnering the financial resources it took to save her. A heartwarming rescue. Baby Jessica was replaced months later by the icebound whales, and the year was punctuated by children needing organ transplants. Fruit, on the second shelf of the refrigerator, makes good copy now.

It is one thing for affluent Americans to settle temporarily for three food groups instead of four, but what about Chile? Not much thought was given to the thousands of out-of-work Chileans whose families will have nothing at all to eat because two among millions of grapes were tainted. Fruit is Chile's second largest export after copper, making up about 10% of total export earnings, and the U.S. is Chile's main market. Two Chilean officials came to Washington on Wednesday to beg Secretary of State James Baker to reconsider the ban. In Chile hundreds of workers demonstrated. Trucks loaded with free fruit wound through the streets. Autos sprouted signs bearing the message MY FAMILY EATS CHILEAN FRUIT. President Augusto Pinochet, in full military uniform, popped a few seedless white grapes into his mouth for television cameras.

Despite the fact that terrorism by its nature is irrational, efforts were made to explain why the grapes had been poisoned. To some Chileans, culprits abounded: it was American fruit growers, acting to sabotage Chile's inroads into the U.S. market. It was the U.S. Government, pressuring Pinochet to turn over the military men accused of ordering the 1976 murder of ex-Ambassador to Washington Minister Orlando Letelier in Washington. It was the caller in Chile who identified himself as an Israeli ultra-nationalist protesting the U.S.-P.L.O. talks. For someone merely interested in having strawberries on his cornflakes, the three-continent skein of commerce and terrorism was growing absurd.

As for Alar on apples, it turns out that 60 Minutes did not highlight the fact that only 5% of apple growers who account for the U.S. harvest spray with Alar. On Thursday three federal agencies responsible for food safety declared that apples are not dangerous to eat and that Alar is not an "imminent hazard" to children. Nonetheless, that same day Meryl Streep testified before a packed Senate Labor and Human Resources subcommittee hearing on Alar's use, "Even now, we don't know what's on our food . . . I no longer want my children to be part of this experiment." An ad campaign starring Streep began airing on March 7.

Some experts say the two incidents, taken together, show that the system works; after all, no one died. Others say it perpetuates the myth that life can be safe, although a look around at the filthy rivers, decrepit nuclear plants, air thick with pollution and tons of toxic wastes with no place to go shows that life is nothing

of the sort. What the Alar alarm and the fruit furor do show is that certain risks -- those that are up close, personal and capable of capturing the public imagination -- make regulatory decisions politically easy. But while all the fuss was being made over the slight possibility that some fresh fruit had been poisoned, hundreds of other perils -- less interesting, less photogenic, more complex and difficult to address -- were overlooked. Regulation that swoops down on the scare of the week keeps attention diverted from the problems individuals can do less about, like acid rain or the country's overflowing trash dumps.

Terrorism has not halted air travel, despite the all too real evidence that threats will sometimes be carried out. Although general warnings about sabotage were not passed on to the passengers on Pan Am Flight 103 last December, many airlines have a policy of informing passengers of bomb threats and giving them the choice of canceling the flight.


Privately, State Department authorities acknowledged that the FDA may have overreacted -- all Chilean fruit on hand was ordered destroyed -- but insisted it would have been irresponsible to have acted otherwise. Government inspectors claim there is no quick way to test for liquid-cyanide poisoning in fruit. But by week's end the FDA was taking an approach similar to the airlines', allowing new imports of grapes and other small fruits but warning consumers to look carefully for holes, mushiness, discoloration or a burnt- almond smell. Safe rather than sorry had given way to FDA Commissioner Young's statement, "It is impossible to assure 100% safety."

Last week was a reminder that life cannot be lived under laboratory conditions. Even the most fortunate Americans are learning that in addition to all the ills the flesh is heir to, terrorism can strike very close to home. But in less affluent, less cushioned societies, people are beset by risks all the time, much worse than anything that most Americans must contend with, and life does not grind to a halt. Unless Americans follow suit, they risk becoming a society that imitates T.S. Eliot's aging, fearful hero J. Alfred Prufrock: they would not dare to eat a peach.

— Reported by Gisela Bolte and Dick Thompson/Washington and Andrea Sachs/New York

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## Keeping Cool About Risk

By [J. MADELEINE NASH](#)[PRINT THIS ARTICLE](#)[BACK TO SEARCH](#)

Sep. 19, 1994

Alar on apples, radon in homes, asbestos in schools. the U.S. appears to ricochet from one environmental crisis to another, with the result that policy aimed at reducing risks to human health frequently appears to make little economic or scientific sense. Even some environmentalists concur that decisions to rip asbestos out of school buildings were probably ill considered. In many cases, sealing the dangerous fibers in place would have provided a more prudent and less costly remedy. Similarly, while no one denies that homes with high levels of radon pose a health hazard requiring prompt attention, what about houses with much lower levels? Is it reasonable to urge that they too be radonproofed if there is no certainty that a danger exists?

Now environmentalists say dioxin and scores of other chemicals pose a threat to human fertility -- as scary an issue as any policymakers have faced. But in the absence of conclusive evidence, what are policymakers to do? What measures can they take to handle a problem whose magnitude is unknown?

Predictably, attempts to whipsaw public opinion have already begun. Corporate lobbyists urge that action be put on hold until science resolves the unanswered questions. Environmentalists argue that evidence for harm is too strong to permit delay. The issue is especially tough because the chemicals under scrutiny are found almost everywhere. Since many of them contain chlorine or are by-products of processes involving chlorine compounds, the environmental group Greenpeace has demanded a ban on all industrial uses of chlorine. The proposal seems appealingly simple, but it would be economically wrenching for companies and consumers alike.

With the escalating rhetoric, many professionals in the risk-assessment business are worried that once again emotion rather than common sense will drive the political process. "There is no free lunch," observes Tammy Tengs, a public-health specialist at Duke University. "When someone spends money in one place, that money is not available to spend on other things." She and her colleagues have calculated that tuberculosis treatment can extend a person's life by a year for less than \$10,000 -- surely a reasonable price tag. By contrast, extending a life by a year through asbestos removal costs nearly \$2 million, since relatively few people would die if the asbestos were left in place. That kind of benefit-risk analysis all too rarely informs the decisions made by government regulators.


As the EPA raises anew the dangers of dioxin, the agency needs to communicate its findings to the public in a calm and clear fashion. No one is eager to touch off the kind of hysteria that preceded the government's decision to move against Alar, the growth regulator once used by apple growers. When celebrities like Meryl Streep spoke out against Alar and the press fanned public fears, some schools and parents rushed to pluck apples out of the mouths of children. Yet all this happened before scientists had reached any consensus about Alar's dangers.

Rhetoric about dioxin may push the same kind of emotional buttons. The chemical becomes relatively concentrated in fat-rich foods -- including human breast milk. Scientists estimate that a substantial fraction of an individual's lifetime burden of dioxin -- as much as 12% -- is accumulated during the first year of life. Nonetheless, the benefits of breast-feeding infants, the EPA and most everyone else would agree, far outweigh the hazards.

John Graham, director of the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, suggests that people should strive to keep the perils posed by dioxin in perspective and remember other threats that are more easily averted. "Phantom risks and real risks compete not only for our resources but also for our attention," Graham observes. "It's a shame when a mother worries about toxic chemicals, and yet her kids are running around unvaccinated and without bicycle helmets."

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