Are we being poisoned by modern life? You’ll often hear terrifying allegations about everything from pesticide-laden food to cellphones to deodorant. Things you’ll hear about less often: black licorice, nutmeg, and even water — all of which, yes, can actually be toxic.

This gets to a common misunderstanding about our health. As the scientist Paracelsus famously said, “The dose makes the poison.”

What that means for our everyday lives: While we tend to think of most objects as either safe or unsafe, the reality is that almost everything is actually both … depending on how much of it we’re exposed to.

The result: Many of the things that generate widespread fear — pesticides on our food or radiation from nuclear power, for example — are surprisingly safe. Meanwhile, many things we regard as inherently harmless can actually be toxic — if they’re used in excessive quantities.

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