If you want advice on which coffee maker or space heater to buy, Consumer Reports (CR) is where you go. Their experts can help you select a Keurig and save a few bucks along the way like nobody else.

Every so often, though, CR ventures far outside its area of expertise and publishes alarmist claims about vitally important chemicals that make modern life possible and pose essentially no risk to public health.

Instead of relying on independent scientists for these assessments, CR conducts its own testing of a consumer product, detects trace amounts of the chemical in question then rushes a press release out the door, which the media dutifully promotes—no actual journalism required.

Case in point: In early January, CR published a glorified blog post claiming that phthalates and bisphenols, chemicals used to make plastic food containers durable and flexible, pose “potential health threats” to consumers.

It’s a dubious conclusion that ignores a wealth of contrary evidence and downplays the important benefits plastic containers provide. Let’s take a look at the critical errors, oversights and sleights of hand that plague CR’s analysis.

Ignoring inconvenient science

Every consumer good the public has access to is thoroughly tested to ensure it can be safely used. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can recall any item it deems a hazard to public health—be it a cosmetic, plastic container, food or other product the agency regulates. Fortunately, recalls are exceedingly rare, because no industry wants to harm its customers and there are severe financial and legal penalties for marketing dangerous products.

No products that contain the chemicals CR attacked have been recalled, and there’s a very good reason for that: years of independent research and review by FDA scientists have shown that they pose no meaningful risk to human health.

For example, Consumer Reports claimed it found phthalates “in almost every food we tested,” then pointed to a handful of speculative studies to justify its “potential health threat” claim. Yet the FDA has extensively evaluated the phthalates used in food-contact materials twice in recent years, finding no support for CR’s claims in either instance. Responding last July to an activist petition demanding FDA ban these chemicals, the agency was clear:

…[W]e do not have a basis to conclude that dietary exposure levels from approved ortho-phthalates exceed a safe level.
That should’ve settled the matter. But anti-chemical agitators are a tenacious bunch. They again petitioned FDA for a phthalate ban, but the agency was still having none of it:

In sum, we concluded that the … information contained in and relied upon by your Original Petition …did not set forth a sufficient showing that the scientific evidence supports amending our regulations to prohibit the use of these substances…

CR’s response to the FDA findings was nothing short of dishonest. While acknowledging that FDA published a review of phthalates in 2022, the activist group only said the agency “rejected an appeal from several groups calling for a ban on multiple phthalates.” FDA’s reasoning for rejecting the petition—there was no scientific justification behind the demand—was left out of CR’s report.

The bisphenol story has a similar arc. The FDA acknowledges that “People are exposed to low levels of BPA because … very small amounts of BPA may migrate from the food packaging into foods or beverages.” Nevertheless, the agency’s answers to the question, “Is BPA safe?” leaves little room for CR’s brand of manufactured doubt:

Yes … Studies pursued by FDA’s National Center for Toxicological Research (NCTR) have shown no effects of BPA from low-dose exposure.

This includes a 223-page study published in 2018, though the agency adds that its ongoing review of the relevant research “continues to support the safety of BPA for the currently approved uses in food containers and packaging.”

The scope of this work is expansive. Studies of cashiers who frequently handle BPA-containing receipt paper have found no evidence of harm; experiments designed to detect neurological and reproductive damage in animals have likewise come up empty; there is also research showing that the human body rapidly metabolizes and eliminates BPA. We could go on and on and on, but there’s no need to belabor the obvious: this chemical doesn’t carry even a fraction of the risk Consumer Reports implies.

Follow the latest news and policy debates on sustainable agriculture, biomedicine, and other ‘disruptive’ innovations. Subscribe to our newsletter.

SIGN UP

The critical benefits of plastic packaging

CR’s other critical mistake was to ignore why food makers rely on plastic packaging in the first place, although the answers are easy to find.

First up, food safety. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), foodborne pathogens cause more than nine million illnesses, 55,000 hospitalizations, and 1,300 deaths each year in the US. Globally, microbial food contamination kills about 420,000 people annually, the World Health
Organization estimates.

Research has shown time and again that plastics are one of the primary reasons so few of those deaths occur in the US. Two food supply chain experts put it simply in 2019:

> Plastic packaging is used in the food supply chain because it supports the safe distribution of food over long distances…

The second, and equally important, issue is food waste—which reached a staggering 931 million tons in 2019. Not only do the greenhouse emissions of food waste dwarf those of plastic production, there are some 830 million people around the world who don’t have enough to eat. Plastic packaging, enhanced by phthalates and bisphenols, has been shown to extend shelf life and thus expand access to nutritious food.

**First-world problems**

Like so many of the activists who champion environmentalism, the do-gooders at Consumer Reports are wealthy, well-fed progressives with too much time and money on their hands. Their ideological zeal has blinded them to the fact that their anti-plastic crusade undermines both their standard of living and other causes they profess to care deeply about.

Hopefully they work through the blatant contradictions in their ideology. Until they do, the rest of us should disregard their loud but shallow complaints about plastic.

David Zaruk is the Firebreak editor, and also writes under the pen-name The Risk Monger. David is a retired professor, environmental-health risk analyst, science communicator, promoter of evidence-based policy and philosophical theorist on activists and the media. Find David on X @Zaruk

A version of this article was originally posted at the Firebreak and is reposted here with permission. Any reposting should credit both the GLP and original article. Find the Firebreak on X @the_firebreak