

---

*Knight Ridder Newspapers*

## **Benzene Fears Prompt Call for Banning Some Soft Drinks at Schools**

**March 27, 2006**

**David Goldstein**

<<<>>>

Retrieved 03/28/06 from

<http://www.bradenton.com/mld/bradenton/news/nation/14199793.htm>

---

WASHINGTON - Some leading public-health experts want education officials to ban certain soft drinks from public schools until they're proved safe and free of the cancer-causing chemical benzene.

"It is irresponsible to provide to schoolchildren products that are unhealthy and may contain a carcinogen," they said in a letter sent last week to state education officials.

Benzene is a common industrial chemical that the Environmental Protection Agency classifies as a human carcinogen. Long-term exposure can cause leukemia and other blood cancers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Benzene isn't an ingredient in soft drinks, but it can form when two commonly found ingredients react: ascorbic acid, otherwise known as vitamin C, and the preservatives sodium benzoate or potassium benzoate. The reaction can happen when products are exposed to light or heat.

"Soft drinks that contain ascorbic acid and sodium or potassium benzoate include Diet Pepsi Wild Cherry, Fanta Orange, Hawaiian Punch, Mug Root Beer, Pepsi Vanilla, Sierra Mist, Sunkist and Tropicana Lemonade, among others," the letter said.

The signatories, who included experts in pediatrics and activists for student health, asked that state and local education officials halt the marketing and sales of certain soft drinks in schools "until you can look parents in the eye and assure them that their children will suffer no harm."

Kevin Keane, a spokesman for the American Beverage Association, the trade group that represents soft-drink manufacturers, said the letter was "irresponsible and reckless" and that the group behind the letter, Commercial Alert, has a history of "bashing" industry. "It would be gullible for schools to bite on this letter," Keane said. "The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) has given no indication there is a public health concern here. We are working with the FDA. There is no way we would put any product in schools or anywhere that is unsafe."

The possible presence of benzene in soda, juice drinks, sports drinks and bottled water became a concern recently when testing found that some products had levels two to four times higher than is considered safe in drinking water.

The high levels surprised the FDA and the beverage industry. Benzene first turned up in soft drinks 16 years ago, but the FDA never told the public because the industry assured federal regulators that it would solve the problem.

George Pauli, a top FDA food-safety official, said the overwhelming majority of test samples showed either no benzene at all or levels that were considered safe. The agency hasn't made any test results public.

"It doesn't seem to be a big issue, but it's an issue that needs to be fixed," Pauli said. He said manufacturers were reformulating some products or taking other steps to ensure their safety.

"Where we've seen elevated levels, we contacted them," Pauli said. "Generally speaking, there's no trouble getting commitments to do something. The worst thing for these companies is bad publicity."

Dr. David Ozonoff, former chairman of the Boston University School of Public Health and a signatory to the letter, said that even if the risk of becoming ill from benzene were as small as one in a million, "if you have millions and millions and millions of kids drinking soft drinks, which you do, the risk of one in a million suddenly starts to be real kids. "We recognize that's a problem in drinking water," said Ozonoff, who teaches environmental health. "If you take the same water, add artificial color, sugar and flavor, it doesn't make the risk go away."

Commercial Alert is a nonprofit advocacy group that campaigns against commercialism aimed at children. Among those who signed the letter were physicians and public health experts associated with the Harvard Medical School, the Yale School of Public Health and the American Academy of Pediatrics.