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Arctic in apple juice: How much is too much?

By [Tom Marshall](#), Times Staff Writer
In Print: Sunday, March 14, 2010

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Health

Apple juice that is mixed, pasteurized and packaged moves through the plant at M&B Products in Tampa. The juice produced at M&B is shipped to schools and hospitals throughout the Southeast.



[SKIP O'ROURKE | Times]

Every school day across the Tampa Bay area and America, kids leave home with apple juice in their lunch boxes. Their toddler siblings drink it from sippy cups.

The labels look kid-friendly: Motts, Apple & Eve Organics, Tree Top.

But what's inside those boxes may not be completely benign.

Independent testing commissioned by the *St. Petersburg Times* has found levels of arsenic that have caught the attention of scientists and parents.

More than a quarter of the 18 samples tested by the *Times* contained between 25 and 35 parts per billion of arsenic — amounts that surpass the Food and Drug Administration's "level of concern" for heavy metals in juices.

Such levels raise the specter of yet another potential hazard in America's global food supply chain. More than 60 percent of the apple juice from concentrate sold in U.S. stores comes from Chinese orchards, and much of the remainder comes from countries such as Chile, Argentina and Turkey. Even American farmers use arsenic-based pesticides, which are viewed by some experts as a possible culprit.

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Federal officials said they have found no reason for parents to worry.

"We don't have any evidence at this point to say that we feel there's a risk issue that you need to be mindful of," said P. Michael Bolger, the Food and Drug Administration's chief of chemical hazards assessment.

The national firms whose juices were tested stood by the quality of their products, and said they look to the government for advice on contaminants like arsenic.

Still, St. Petersburg parent Lynn Gordon said she was unnerved to discover what she might be feeding her daughter.

"Juice, milk and water, that's what she drinks," Gordon said. "I want to know those three things are safe."

Expectation of safety, but not avoidable

And some of the nation's top arsenic scientists said the arsenic levels found by the *Times* were worrisome.

"Kids tend to drink a lot of juice, and we tend to give them a lot of juice because we think it's a healthy snack," said Joshua Hamilton, a toxicologist with the federally funded Dartmouth Toxic Metals Research Program. "So there would be some irony if we were then exposing them to higher levels than an adult would get in bottled water, which I think everyone expects to be safe."

Arsenic is a naturally occurring substance, and experts say it can't be entirely avoided in the food and water supply.

It also has been proved to cause cancer when consumed at high levels in drinking water over a lifetime, and has been linked at lower levels to diabetes, organ damage and hormone system changes.

In 2006, the federal government lowered the limit for arsenic in drinking water from 50 ppb to 10 ppb. The FDA has established no such limit for fruit juices, but has told companies it views 23 ppb as a "level of concern."

Arsenic levels in juice shouldn't be compared with the drinking water limit, the FDA says, since the latter assumes a lifetime of exposure, and most children consume far less juice. Others argue it's a reasonable comparison.

The *Times* tested two samples from each of eight national brands, plus two samples from a local company that supplies public schools throughout the Tampa Bay region.

Samples from three brands — Motts, Apple & Eve Organics, and Walmart's Great Value label — contained between 25 and 35 ppb of arsenic, above the FDA's level of concern.

The brands Nestle's Juicy Juice, Minute Maid, Tree Top and Target's Market Pantry contained between 12 and 24 ppb. One sample of Walmart's juice contained no arsenic, and one Nestle's sample tested at nearly undetectable levels.

A recent University of Arizona study found similar results, with nine out of 10 samples of apple and grape juice containing 10 to 47 ppb of arsenic. While some foods contain a harmless, organic form of arsenic, the study said most of the arsenic in juices was of the toxic, inorganic variety.

Only one juice tested by the *Times* — sold by M&B Products of Tampa and distributed to school lunch programs throughout the region — contained no detectable levels of arsenic in two samples.

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[JAMES BORCHUCK | Times]

Jessica Passman of St. Petersburg says her daughters, Destiny, 10, and Kiara, 6, drink two cups of apple juice a day, and sometimes more on weekends.

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Company president Dale McClellan says he aims to keep his juices below the drinking-water limit for arsenic. But the FDA should set a clear standard for juice, he said.

"We're traveling in the dark and we need some guidance," McClellan said.

A diminishing domestic market

There was a time when the 55-year-old McClellan didn't know much about apple juice, international trade, or arsenic.

His office, which sits in a trailer on the farm where he was raised, is loaded with cow paraphernalia — cow pictures, cow dolls, even a clock that moos.

"I'm just a local ham-and-egger," he told a visitor.

Since the late 1980s, when McClellan revived his family's failed dairy business and started selling drinks to local schools and institutions, U.S. apple juice producers have been getting pummeled by cheap imports.

American growers, who made around half of the country's apple juice from concentrate in 1989, today control less than a fifth of the market. China's output for the United States during the same period soared from 10,000 gallons to more than 444 million.

Arsenic-based pesticides are still being used in many of those orchards, said Charles Benbrook, chief scientist at the Organic Center in Enterprise, Ore.

"If the orchard was planted on a field that was treated six or eight or 10 times over the last 30 years, it would build up to a high level," he said.

These days, McClellan gets his apple juice concentrate from China, just like his competitors. But he searches for the best suppliers — ones that guarantee minimal levels of arsenic.

"If some of our customers have fears, we react to that," he said.

Other companies whose juices were tested said they do routine testing, follow the government's advice and monitor international standards.

"They rely on the government and FDA to set those regulations and guidance," said Carol Freysinger, executive director of the Washington-based Juice Products Association.

Coca-Cola said testing sometimes reveals too much arsenic in the juice it gets from suppliers for its Minute Maid brand. "We have occasionally seen samples that exceed the FDA's level of guidance or concern, and those have been rejected," said spokesman Ray Crockett.

Looking for data to set the standards

FDA officials said they have been tracking the issue of arsenic contamination in apple juice since foreign producers began gaining market share.

"It's been a cause for concern to us for around five years," Bolger said.

In 2008, the FDA alerted its border inspectors after Canadian health officials detected high arsenic levels in Chinese pear juice packaged in U.S. factories. Testing showed the juice averaged 28 and 32 ppb for arsenic.

Since then, Bolger said, the FDA has found some apple juice samples with more than 25 ppb of arsenic following increased testing. But the average for those tests was 9 ppb.

More evidence is needed to justify setting limits on arsenic in juice, Bolger said. "We've got to generate the appropriate information, because you can't fly blind," he said. "You have to have some good data to back it up."

No one said they knew of people coming to harm from drinking apple juice.

But several of the nation's top arsenic scientists said the FDA needs to take extra precautions for products like juice, which are marketed largely to children.

"(Juices) ought to meet the drinking water standards, and if they don't, that's where the pressure should go," said Allan Smith, director of the Arsenic Health Effects Research Program at the University of California at Berkeley.

He said at least 1 million Americans drink water from rural wells or taps that exceeds the federal limit. For those people, arsenic in juice just adds to their total exposure. (Tap water in the Tampa Bay area routinely tests far below the federal limit for arsenic.)

Toxicologist Hamilton has spent his career focusing on the potential risks of low-level exposure to arsenic.

He has found that even short-term exposure interferes with hormone systems in laboratory animals, raising the possibility of brain development risks in kids.

"I wouldn't want parents to be overly upset that their children are at risk from having drunk apple juice," said Hamilton, who also serves as chief scientific officer at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass. "But as consumers, I think they should be able to expect that these products have levels of contaminants that are as low as are achievable."

Not all scientists found cause for worry.

Carl Winter, a toxicologist and chief of the FoodSafe Program at the University of California at Davis, said the amounts of arsenic found by the *Times* in apple juice were minuscule.

"This is a tiny amount of a chemical, it's sort of the tip of a needle in a haystack," he said. "You can find these metals in the environment, and sometimes plants can take them out of the soil and you can find them."

'There's no safe level of arsenic exposure'

But consumer advocates said companies shouldn't wait for the FDA to act and set a limit. They should take steps to lower their arsenic numbers.

"Really, there's no safe level of arsenic exposure for a kid," said Richard Wiles, senior vice president for policy at the Environmental Working Group. "And it certainly shouldn't be in these juices."

Tampa Bay area parents who saw the *Times'* results said they were surprised to learn of the potential arsenic threat, as well as the fact that most apple juice now comes from overseas.

"I am kind of shocked by this," said parent Darcie Salvant of St. Petersburg. "It's not something we drink every day, but we do drink apple juice."

She said she wouldn't necessarily stop serving it to her 4-year-old daughter, but she would watch to see how companies address the issue.

"I don't know that I would alter my behavior, but I'm going to pay attention," Salvant said.

Parent Lynn Gordon said she would try to find brands that contained less arsenic. "I guess I would want to be informed," she said. "To me, no level of arsenic in juice is safe."

Jessica Passman of St. Petersburg said her children, Destiny, 10, and Kiara, 6, love apple juice and drink two cups of it every day.

"On the weekends they probably get more," Passman said.

She said she understands that arsenic can't be completely eliminated from her kids' diet, and she might not stop serving juice. But she'll do her best to minimize any risks.

"It's like the sun," Passman said. "The sun can be bad for you, too. But you take precautions."

Tom Marshall can be reached at tmarshall@sptimes.com or (813) 226-3400.

How is arsenic getting into apple juice?

Experts say the use of arsenic-based pesticides may be contributing to elevated levels of arsenic in some juices. Arsenic also occurs naturally in air, water and soil, and is present in other foods.

How dangerous is arsenic?

Arsenic is known to cause cancer over a lifetime of exposure at high levels in drinking water. While the Tampa Bay area generally has very low levels of arsenic in water, experts say 1 million Americans who use rural wells or live in the Southwest drink high levels. Research has shown links between lower levels of arsenic and diabetes, organ damage and hormone system disruptions.

Should I stop drinking apple juice?

Scientists say no. People generally drink far less juice than water. But the experts say it's wise to consume juice and other drinks in moderation, as part of a balanced diet. Some people don't metabolize arsenic well, and they could be at increased risk.

What are companies and the government doing about this issue?

Companies say they're following the FDA's lead in determining the level of arsenic in juice. They say they test for arsenic, and some say they reject supplies that contain too much of it.

The FDA says that it has increased testing of juice concentrate, but that it has not seen enough data to justify establishing a formal limit for arsenic in juices. It has told companies that juices containing more than 23 ppb of arsenic are of concern.

What do some arsenic scientists say about the *Times'* results?

They say the results highlight a concern. A few say juices should not contain more arsenic than is allowed in water, and most say the FDA should consider setting a formal limit for arsenic in juice.

[Last modified: Mar 14, 2010 05:46 PM]

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Oldest First

 **juliafor** wrote:
 the sky is falling... yet we are all living longer hmmm...
 Mar 12, 2010 6:38 PM 0 6 [Report Abuse](#)

 **bugnout** wrote:
 Maybe the Times can "commission" a reporter (if they have any) to follow these so called homeless people to their houses in order to expose fraud.
 Mar 12, 2010 6:55 PM 0 5 [Report Abuse](#)

 **keeneke** wrote:
 Mr. Marshall, I'm sorry but as a parent who has dealt with WAY too many food scares that really had a justified reason to cause concern, this is such a nothin report! We get trace minerals in many foods and beverages that we eat. Why do you decide to single out Apple Juice? And why don't you explain to your reader what a "part per billion" is? OK, I will... one part per billion is like adding a PINCH of salt to a 10 TON bag of potato chips. Or one sheet in a roll of toilet paper stretchin from New York to London! My son couldn't live w/o his AJ -- and I will continue to give it to him with pleasure.
 Mar 12, 2010 7:16 PM 0 4 [Report Abuse](#)

 **nyscof** wrote:
 Few people know that arsenic is also in the the fluoride chemicals added to publi drinking water supplies (http://www.nsf.org/business/water_distribution/pdf/NSF_Fact_Sheet.pdf). So concentrated apple juice is mixed with fluoridated tap water, that can add a littl more arsenic.
 Fluoridation chemicals are derived from the manufacture of phosphate fertilizer, according to the Centers for Disease Control.
 Phosphate fertilizers are the same suspected source of apple juice's arseni contamination
 Also, much of the fluoridation chemicals are now originating in China, Japan an Mexico, according to the CDC
 There is something foreign in the Chinese fluoride chemicals that is clogging u some water systems (<http://www.thebostonchannel.com/news/22814488/detail.html>). Wonder if it' clogging up our bodies, too.
 People have the right to know what chemicals they are ingesting, no matter wha the level. Individuals not to decide what's safe for themselves and their children.
 Mar 13, 2010 5:51 AM 3 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **Blambe61** wrote:
 This is a great example of the very bad things coming out of China. Their pes management and pesticide usage techniques are ancient. Basically there is n guidelines as to what they can use in these orchards compared to our stric guidelines here in North America. I am an apple grower and have heard first han some of the disgusting and shady things that go on over in these orchards. We hav the best growers in the world here in the U.S. and in Canada and yet they cann sell their product because China pretty much gives their product away. Leave th Chinese products overseas where it belongs and leave the safe products for reputable North American growers for us. As a consumer and a family man I woul much rather know where my apples are coming from and know what is going int growing and producing them. Read labels, find out where the juice is coming from North American Apples are the best and safest in the world. Buy the best not th cheapest. Buy local.
 Mar 13, 2010 11:07 AM 5 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **Floridave** wrote:
 Is this really an issue? It looks like it's just another oppportunity to spout off for th whackos that thought water flouridation was a communist plot.
 Go ahead outspoo, say your piece.
 Mar 13, 2010 12:10 PM 0 3 [Report Abuse](#)

 **emchale** wrote:

I raised [4] wonderful kids-all grown...but back in the day they got jar baby food to start; except on juice we bought larger sizes. Then one day in the news it was reported that those nice people at Gerber baby foods were selling caramel colored sugar water as apple juice-until they got caught! But these days we buy apples from China of all places! China is still an enemy of the US as far as I'm concerned Chincoms. Bring on the lead painted kids toys, the cheap crap we import that cost enough, but lasts as long as an ice cube in the sun. It seems a concerted effort is underway to "dilute" the basic substrate of American expectations of quality and the feeling we deserve our place in the world since the end of World War II. Make us just another 3rd world consumer country. It seems that companies that once tossed out substandard products off the line-now toss them into the bin that sez "Sell it Florida."

Mar 13, 2010 4:29 PM 1 0 [Report Abuse](#)



emchale wrote:

Arsenic is used as a preservative in the wood used to make childrens playgrounds in a lot of places isn't it?

Mar 13, 2010 4:35 PM 2 0 [Report Abuse](#)



Dawn wrote:

So the government say's there is nothing to be concerned about...well of course we all know they are the most honest upstanding Americans there are. Sarcastic intended!

Mar 13, 2010 9:22 PM 1 0 [Report Abuse](#)



dhanes420 wrote:

Look, my wife is Chinese born. I try not to buy or feed my children anything that is manufactured in China. My wife also agrees (finally). They are experiencing a boom in economics after decades of totalitarian rule, and anyone and everyone are trying to make a buck; without regard for anyone's safety. Just say no to Chinese manufactured products. That's easy to say and extremely difficult to achieve in this day and age. Keep cognizant about what you're putting into your and your children's bodies.

Mar 13, 2010 10:37 PM 1 0 [Report Abuse](#)



Ben G wrote:

Kids used to be exposed to lead and had all kinds of problems because of that. Now it's arsenic. Who knows for sure how much arsenic is too much. It's especially hard to know since it's impossible to guess how much arsenic a child will be exposed to over a lifetime. But it's always better to be safe than sorry. Give a kid water or milk to drink, if you are going to give him or her fruit then either give them organic apples from apples grown as close to home as possible, or organic applesauce. There is no reason to feed a kid juice all day anyway.

Mar 14, 2010 1:10 AM 1 0 [Report Abuse](#)



ricksteves wrote:

True, we are living longer, but are we living BETTER? We pop pills for all kinds of ailments these days, kids in schools have learning disabilities, men today have half the sperm count they did 50 years ago (<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-156598371.html>). Ya think there might be a reason?

People, wake up. And don't trust anything that comes from China. Not ragging on China, but their health standards SUCK.

Mar 14, 2010 7:09 AM 1 0 [Report Abuse](#)



chinesedrywall wrote:

Sounds to me like the FDA has already done the research to decide what levels of arsenic are safe to be in water. Let's make the same guidelines for juice! We all must become more aware of what we are purchasing as consumers and where it is coming from. Being a homeowner that has had a product from China destroy our home, all of its contents and made us extremely ill, makes me check the label on everything that I purchase and will expose my family to. We are living without Mad in China. I will never let my children be lab rats to their experiments that our country allows in. During this process I did come to the knowledge that at least 2/3 of an apple juice in this country is imported from China. Now we check the labels and there are juices out there that are Made with 100% US grown apples. If you are purchasing a juice blend then there is no way to know where it has been imported from... the FDA only makes the juice companies label one ingredient juices not blends!

Mar 14, 2010 11:12 AM 1 0 [Report Abuse](#)



ctb wrote:

It's certainly a relief to know that the juice in our school lunch program tested OK schoolkids are a "captive audience"! & many after school programs serve those juices as well.

& Amen! to nyscof's comment that people DO have a right to know what's in the foods we buy & serve to our families. It's certainly true that drinking juice all day long is not much healthier than soda or -ades, but the sad truth is that too many people do it. Thanks for this important report. STTimes

Mar 14, 2010 11:20 AM 0 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **sensiblefloridian** wrote:

Today's children are not expected to enjoy the same life expectancy as their parents. Truth be told, the next generation WILL NOT be living longer. Juice is full of sugar and is not actually the best choice anyway. Kids should be drinking milk, water, and very little juice.

Mar 14, 2010 1:39 PM 0 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **sidney** wrote:

Yes, water, low fat milk and very little juice is right. Oh, but I digress, schools are still pushing snack machines to make money and the kids are fat and dumb. Arsenic is not a major issue folks. Fat is.

Mar 14, 2010 2:21 PM 0 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **emchale** wrote:

dhanes420 wrote what to me are magic & hoped for words: Don't buy anything made in China. Boy, if we could pull that off! Imagine the virtual "clog" that would create in the Walmarts of the world. If we could only last out the duration. Anyone capable could put a list of more safe & maybe even American based companies on the net. It's not protectionism like they try to tell you in argument. It's protectionism for America's health & maybe even a little old time quality. I think people would be glad to pay a bit more for quality instead of the repeat purchases needed to keep yourself in clothes & much else. Walmart/Chinese as well as businesses like Home Depot/Chinese products would tank. A list of American companies--real American companies making good stuff would be welcome. Heck, even L.L. Bean was bought out by the Japanese. The actions of American companies in recent years just seem cheap in all but the price.

Mar 14, 2010 4:31 PM 0 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **sallydreamsofthebeach** wrote:

Thank you for this report! What a great article.

I know many people these days scoff at organic labels, retorting that "we're still breathing, people aren't dropping like flies..." Even though arsenic can occur naturally, I'm confused at why people think it is okay to eat food that has been sprayed with chemicals.

Mar 17, 2010 3:11 PM 0 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **ChuckBaggett** wrote:

The article says: "Research has shown links between lower levels of arsenic and diabetes, organ damage and hormone system disruptions." Presumably that means to say there are links between higher levels of arsenic and diabetes."

Mar 17, 2010 7:57 PM 0 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **FruitJuiceRD** wrote:

There is no need for parents to worry about the safety of apple juice. The Time article is extremely misleading to parents, as the laboratory tests inappropriately compare juice to drinking water standards and not the limits set for juices and other foods. The trace minerals detected in the juice samples are naturally found throughout our food supply (even in whole fruit) and all juices tested by the Time meet current safety standards set by the FDA. I work closely with the Juice Product Association and as a registered dietitian I remain confident in recommending 100% fruit juices to parents. One hundred percent juice is a nutrient dense beverage choice that supplies a full serving of fruit per half cup portion. Readers can find more information about the health and safety of apple juice and other juices here <http://www.juiceproducts.org/031410.html>.

Mar 18, 2010 1:59 PM 0 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **Tom Marshall** wrote:

In response to FruitJuiceRD, I'd like to point out that the St. Petersburg Times compared its test results to the FDA's own "level of concern" of 23 ppb for arsenic in fruit juice. That level was established in 2008 after the FDA found "elevated levels of arsenic in pear juice from China averaging 28 and 32 ppb -- levels that are entirely consistent with Times apple juice samples that tested at 30, 34 and 35 ppb for arsenic. http://www.accessdata.fda.gov/cms_ia/importalert_56.html

Was it inappropriate for us to even mention the federal drinking water limits for arsenic? Experts quoted in the story didn't think so; they made such comparisons themselves. In that context, we didn't think it was reasonable for us to withhold the information from readers.

Tom Marshall, Times Staff Writer

Mar 19, 2010 10:01 PM 0 0 [Report Abuse](#)

 **vepached64** wrote:

The only thing we need to do, not just in the case of apple juice and arsenic, but als with respect to farming and horticulture in general. Controlled use of pesticides and insecticides is highly indicated.

Coming to the presence of Arsenic in naturally in apples, unless someone has th tendency to drink too much of apple juice, one need not worry about it. About th presence of Cyanide in apple seeds (mentioned in the previous comment), no on need to be panic, because, we rarely eat apple seeds and unless we masticate, the pass through feces and the source of cyanide in them is not released. The problem i only, if some one chews and masticates many apple seeds.

Finally, to be alive we have to eat something or the other, any food item in th creation does harm if we don't process it and eat the way it should be done. Sc unless some toxic chemical is found in highly excess amounts, for regular food items we need not worry unnecessarily.

http://www.allianceonline.com/act_w...

Mar 21, 2010 7:48 PM

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vepached64 wrote:

The only thing we need to do, not just in the case of apple juice and arsenic, but als with respect to farming and horticulture in general. Controlled use of pesticides and insecticides is highly indicated.

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