

DANGEROUS TOYS: Infamous Product Recalls

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Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

**(Note: transcript
consists of episode
outline)**

Originally suggested by
Inscomiic Fox from Discord
and voted on by the
discord crew.

We're calling this
"dangerous toys," but
we're going to cover all
kinds of products.

Bindeez

Also called Aqua Dots, "Bindeez" was declared toy of the year in Australia in 2007, but it was less of a toy and more of a project that parents could delegate to their children. I guess you'd call it arts and crafts, but there's a definite sweatshop vibe. So these were popular colored beads that were sold alongside a perforated plastic tray, and you could arrange the beads in the tray to create designs, and then you would spray the beads with water. And each bead was coated with an adhesive, so that when they were hit with water they would fuse together. And then you would remove the design from the tray and give it the kid's grandparents

because those are the only people who would pretend it was some kind of art instead of an ugly clump of goopy beads. So the toy was terrible enough without also being a narcotic. The problem, it turned out, was that in 2007 a Chinese factory had decided to cut corners. In place of a relatively expensive nontoxic plasticiser called 1,5-Pentanediol (that's really what it's called, like the name of the chemical includes numbers and punctuation...science is weird...can an Insomniac explain that to us?) they had substituted 1,4-butanediol. Common mistake. Happens all the time. Last week I was baking a cake and instead of sugar I poured in some one-four, butanediol. I use plasticisers in all my

confections. Gives it a nice sheen. Also great for digestion and regularity. Really shoots right through you. And in this case it also gets you high. And not a fun, recreational high. When ingested, 1,4-butanediol metabolizes into the psychoactive narcotic *gamma*-Hydroxybutyric acid. Aka GHB. AKA the daterape drug. Oops. How would you like to be a publicist for the Bindeez company. Tough issue to spin. "Hey, Sorry for the whole "roofing your kids" thing." On the plus side, the Chinese manufacturing company Wangqi probably saved like sixty bucks, so, you know. Worth it. The press freaked out, somewhat understandably, but there was a lot of speculation that the beads were going to be sold on

the black market, which doesn't seem to have actually happened. "Hey bro, wanna buy some beads? You can Slip em in a lady's drink, she'll never notice a lump of colorful beads in her martini." Not practical.

So it took a little bit of sleuthing for doctors to figure out the connection between a bunch of drugged children and the beads. That's pretty awkward to have to explain to a skeptical medical community.. "No Dr., I cannot explain how my four-year-old child got his hands on a date rape drug. He always covers his glass of vodka with a coaster when he goes to the bathroom so I felt like he was safe. Best practices." This is dark.

The beads were recalled

from the Australian and American markets but subsequently reintroduced with the correct formulation, plus a coating of a bitter chemical called Bitrex In order to discourage ingestion. So the revised version was engineered to taste terrible. They should have called them "bitter beads." but then I guess people would be tempted to try them out. Product naming matters. You don't want to name your child's toy "delicious Legos." that's just asking for trouble. regardless, I'm skeptical as to whether the bitter coating will work. humans are stubborn. I'm pretty sure tide pods didn't taste like starburst, but never underestimate the determination of a person who has decided to do some stupid shit.

So basically the manufacturer used the same technique people use to get cats to stop chewing electrical cords. Spray it with acrid flavor. I kind of support this, which is why I will never have kids. I would apply all of those terrible cat-training strategies to children. Spray bottles, in particular. Not of bitter liquid, just of water. But at a very high velocity. Like enough to lift them off their feet, like a handheld firehose. "I told you not to pull my dog's tail, tummy." Kids gotta learn. I do not advocate child abuse. But I used to fantasize about it when kids were pulling my dog's tail. But really, kids are fine, don't firehose them. You can trust me around your future kids, Duncan. I just won't trust them around my pets. And

everyone wins.

Takata airbags

So the goal of an airbag is to provide a soft cushion for your face in the event of a car crash. Proper Airbag functionality is a tricky feat to pull off, because the airbag has to inflate in a fraction of a second, immediately upon sensing impact. An airbag that failed to inflate would be useless. The only thing worse than a useless airbag? A pipe bomb in your steering wheel. Which is basically what you had if the airbag in your car was manufactured by the Japanese Takata corporation. While a standard airbag will use compressed gas to inflate in the blink of an eye, a Takata airbag would

instead send white-hot shrapnel rocketing through your sensitive organs. So, you know, different. The Takata company went a different route. They're Mavericks. The scandal is a little less funny than it sounds. If it sounds funny at all. The hot-shrapnel-through-faces scandal was actually pretty tragic, if you can believe it, but we'll hold off on the details. And it's still ongoing, btw, this started in 2004 and ballooned into the most expensive recall of all time. That wasn't an intentional pun.

Ballooned? That would've been in poor taste.

This was actually the second product recall targeting the Takata corporation. The first one, in 1995, involved defective seatbelts. The buckles were prone to releasing

spontaneously, and/or during accidents. Those are both bad. In case anyone isn't familiar with how a standard seatbelt works, if we have any Amish listeners who also have smartphones, they're not supposed to do that. Neither of those things is ok, at all. In fact if there's one thing a seatbelt is supposed to not do, it's spontaneously release during a collision.

The seatbelt recall was, at the time, the second largest recall in the history of the department of transportation. Go big, Takata. So they now own first AND second place. I love that they pulled a hold-my-beer on themselves. They were like, "*second* largest recall ever? HMB, me."

Foreshadowing: Takata was fined \$50,000 for

delaying tactics, for not disclosing the defect in a timely manner.

Specifically, regulators accused them of knowing about the defect five years before disclosing it to the Safety Administration.

So maybe in retrospect Takata wasn't the best choice for making airbags. But the company had a long history in the safety industry. By the time the airbag recall began, Takata controlled 20 percent of the steering-wheel balloon market. I didn't want to say airbag again. The inflating face-saver market. The car crash Whoopi cushion. The company actually first produced airbags in 1988, and the first of the defective line may date from as far back as 1998. So they had a solid decade of saving lives before they started firing shrapnel into

the faces of their customers. Kind of weird to think about because they objectively saved more lives than they ultimately took, but like, that's not how the morality equation works. Saving lives isn't like a down payment on future murders. You can't be Superman and save lives for ten years and then just have a bad week and massacre a city block. And then simmer down and be like, whatever. do the math, I'm a net positive in the karma department. But it's still weird to me that they saved so many lives before they were awful. The airbag recall kicked off in 2013. The culprit, according to investigators, was inflator units assembled at a factory in Coahuila Mexican. The explosive propellants were

contaminated with moisture as a result of improper handling. I don't know why. I was going to make a joke but I can't think of anything that wouldn't come across as weirdly racist or something, like Mexican people can't handle explosives? I don't think that's a common stereo if it feels racist.

So the rest is not funny. It's pretty horrid. One of the victims was a pregnant woman whose neck was sliced by shrapnel during a collision at 18 mph. 30 kph. That's awful. She would have been fine if the thing that was supposed to save her hadn't instead done the opposite. That's so fucking terrible. It's like if you got in a minor fender bender on your motorcycle and your helmet just shanked her in the neck.

The thing that was supposed to save your life. You paid extra for the thing that murdered you. It's awful.

This wasn't just one car brand, there were 12 brands using these defective units, including Toyota, Ford, Honda, Chrysler, BMW, Volkswagen, Tesla, Jaguar, Ferrari, all of them. Weirdly though, the vast majority of injuries and fatalities involved Hondas. Like basically all of them.

Which is weird, and apparently we still didn't have an answer as to why. Overall More than 53 million cars have been affected by the recall and the total cost so far is over 24 billion dollars and counting. Takata filed for bankruptcy in 2017. The company was acquired by Key Safety Systems and

rebranded as Joyson Safety Systems. They didn't go with "murderbag," weirdly. That would have been my vote.

Tylenol

This one is dark. It's rare that you find a story about a product recall with a true-crime twist. So you're welcome. Or I guess if you really enjoy this story you could thank the murderer, he made it all possible.

Chicago, 1982. In September, a 12-year-old girl collapsed and died. Later that day a 27 year old man was rushed to the hospital, where he died later that evening, and he was followed by his brother and sister in-law. Investigators quickly pieced together the common denominator: each of the victims had

taken Tylenol hours before falling deathly ill. When laboratories tested the capsules, they found that they contained cyanide. Tylenol's manufacturer, Johnson and Johnson, immediately shifted into damage control mode, and this is considered one of the great rebounds from what could've been a death blow for the company. Rather than just a deathblow for a bunch of consumers. So, yay! The company survived. A lot of people didn't, but you know, a corporation is a person so...that counts, right? It's true the Johnson and Johnson was extremely proactive. They issued a recall less than a week after the first poisoning, and pulling the roughly 31 million bottles off the shelves cost Tylenol over 109 million

dollars, which would be almost three times that today. So they did the right thing, most likely for the wrong reasons, but hey, if corporate interests align with human interests I'm not going to complain.

Tylenol got a lot of credit for salvaging their product, but ultimately I think the real reason their product recovered was because the cyanide contamination had nothing to do with the product. This wasn't a manufacturing issue, it wasn't Johnson and Johnson's fault, someone in the Chicago area was buying bottles of Tylenol, swapping some of the pills for cyanide, and putting the containers back on the shelves. This was back before childproof, tamperproof packaging, so there was no seal on a bottle of pills. How easy

must it have been to handle a hangover in 1982. Just go to your local Walgreens, knock back a couple Tylenol, and put the bottle back. I feel like no one ever purchased a full bottle of Tylenol, there were always a few sacrificed to the hangover or PMS gods.

There were seven victims of the Chicago poisoner, but what made it even worse were the copycat crimes. What a perfect encapsulation of my misanthropy, the fact that awful people all across the country looked at this terrible incident and were like, "why didn't I think of that?"

On the plus side, as I alluded to before, the Chicago incidents and subsequent copycat poisonings led to much-needed industry reforms

with which we're all familiar. Sealed caps and childproof bottles.

Amazing that it took so long. Like I can't imagine a time when companies were like, let's just put a bunch of unsealed bottles of medicine on the shelves, during an era with no video cameras...let's blindly trust our fellow humans, this is a strategy that has never failed.

EASYBAKE OVEN

So as we saw to an extent with Bindeez, toy recalls are bonkers. Not necessarily the recalls themselves, but more the fact that when you learn about the recalls you become aware that these toys existed in the first place. Especially back in

like the 1950s, they had real toys like razor blade slingshots, it's crazy...I remember watching Christmas story when I was young and being on the side of the kid, like "let the little boy have a full-on rifle," and now I'm solidly on team "you'll shoot your eye out." There were no safety standards in the fifties. All these war-inspired soldier-toys.

"Your children will love this fully functional lifesize tank with flamethrower attachment and optional nuclear capability."

So in comparison to many of the homicidal toys of the era, a functional oven for a child seems quite tame, but shockingly, giving eight-year-old kids a miniature electrical kitchen appliance didn't work out as well as you'd expect. Or

maybe it totally worked out exactly as everyone should expect. The amazing thing is that it took fifty years for the easy bake oven to start mangling children. The original version, released way back in 1963, used a standard incandescent lightbulb to heat a special batter and produce a little hockey puck of "cake." The newer versions feature a real miniature heating element. But strangely it wasn't the heating element that did the damage, or at least that wasn't the part that malfunctioned. The 2006 version was like a rat trap for kids' fingers. Initially, 29 kids reported getting their fingers stick and sustaining burns, so Hasbro released a grate to cover the oven's door. As a result of the fix, the

number of injury complaints jumped to 249, 16 of which were second or third degree. A five-year-old girl had to have a portion of her finger amputated. The recall was reissued...a process known in the industry as "DOH!" Almost a million of the ovens were eventually recalled.

Anti-Drug Slogan Pencils

America's war against drugs has always been a rational, reasonable, successful and in no way comically misguided endeavor. So when, in 1998, the Bureau for At-Risk Youth released a line of number two pencils engraved with the inspiring slogan "too cool to do drugs," the nation

collectively celebrated a clearly brilliant messaging strategy that would no doubt touch the hearts of vulnerable youth and lead to an immediate drop in rates of drug use. Either that or it would become one of the most embarrassing, boneheaded symbols of the ineptitude of bureaucratic government agencies and the futility of vacuous slogans.

The pencils were proudly distributed to schoolchildren, who quickly discovered a fun and entertaining design-feature. The slogan was printed with the beginning of the sentence opposite from eraser, so when you sharpened the pencils, the slogan would morph through various iterations. First, children would shave off the word "Too," leaving

only "Cool to do drugs."
Sharpen off a bit more and you're left with the inspiring message, "Do drugs!" One more sharpen and you're in possession of a government-issued pencil for children simply labeled "drugs." The bureau promptly issued a recall but not before word had leaked to the media, and the pencils became a collector's item. No word on how many people lost their CV jobs.

"We're actually a little embarrassed that we didn't notice that sooner," said bureau spokeswoman Darlene Clair. I'm assuming she was one. Or maybe not, it's the government. The whole problem is that these people should have been fired years ago.

The bureau issued new pencils with the slogan

printed the opposite way, so that the word drugs disappeared first, but for some reason those pencils were far less popular than the ones with the staunchly pro-drug message.

Vitaminwater insult

This one reminds me of our AI episode. You'll see why. So you're familiar with Snapple facts?

Snapple is a line of popular iced teas owned by the Dr Pepper company, and the bottles are famous for featuring little interesting facts printed on the bottom of the caps.

Snapple is like us, in bottle cap form, only way more successful. And more delicious. So the coca cola company decided to do something similar in 2013 with their vitamin water

brand. Canada has two official languages: English and French, and many Canadians are bilingual. In the spirit of multiculturalism, Coca Cola chose to print various random English and French words on the bottom of vitamin water caps to symbolize the synergy of the two languages and cultures. This promotion resulted in some truly creative word combinations. One Canadian photographer and vitamin water enthusiast who had an autistic sister purchased a bottle and, unaware of the bilingual promotion, was surprised to unscrew the cap and find the message "you retard," in all caps. Can you imagine opening a bottle and finding a random insult in a caps? Fuck your, vitamin water.

“Retard” in French means “late,” which is still kind of rude. You late.

Her father wrote an open letter scolding Coca Cola, and it gained some traction.

The company responded “We started printing random combinations of English and French words under the caps of glacéau vitaminwater. The top word English and the bottom, a different word in French. Regretfully, the French words were not reviewed from an English standpoint. In this case a French word, despite an innocuous meaning in French but an offensive meaning in English, made the production list of words... Given the random nature of the printing process, we do not know whether or not this

specific text was used more than once, however we believe the chances are extremely slim." So as far as I can tell this is the only product on our list that didn't result in a recall. But I included it because it really should've. This is just on the list to shame Coca Cola because Jesus man.

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