

She Burned Me With Science

By Reg P. Wydeven
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In my high school physics class, we learned about the different boiling and freezing points of liquids. While water boils at 212° and freezes at 32°, our teacher explained that liquid nitrogen, for example, could remain liquid even in temperatures below -300°. As an experiment, he dipped a rose into the liquid and then shattered it on the countertop.

Having our full attention, our teacher then explained that he lost the feeling in the middle finger of his right hand from an injury he received in the service. He wore a rubber glove to protect his skin, but then proceeded to dip his finger into liquid nitrogen. Because of the injury, the cold didn't bother him.

He then removed his finger, put his hand on the counter and smashed his finger with a hammer, shattering it into pieces that scattered about the classroom. One of the students almost fainted, and another almost threw up. The rest of us thought this was the coolest science experiment ever conducted.

Unbeknownst to us, the teacher had inserted a hot dog into the middle finger of his rubber glove. He then was very frank and warned us of the dangers of liquid nitrogen that looked harmless but could cause tremendous tissue damage with just a tiny exposure. He informed us that doctors use it to burn off people's moles or other imperfections.

Almost 30 years later, I still vividly remember that experiment and the dangers of liquid nitrogen. Unfortunately, several people across the country are learning that lesson now – the hard way.

One of the fastest growing food sensations across the globe is “Dragon Breath,” a novelty made by pouring liquid nitrogen over cereal puffs. Because the puffs are so cold, when a person places the puff in their mouth and exhales, it appears as though they are breathing smoke. Because it looks pretty cool, the food craze quickly spread across the globe after emerging two years ago in the Philippines and South Korea.

The snack is typically found at festivals, malls and at state and county fairs. While most people eat it without incident, not everyone has been so lucky.

Lane Mattison, a resident of Greenville, South Carolina, tried Dragon Breath at the local Haywood Mall. After his second bite of the frozen treat, he knew something was wrong. His tongue was bleeding profusely. After his pain intensified and his mouth swelled, he went to his doctor who confirmed that Mattison suffered a burn from liquid nitrogen.

Mattison's doctor had to prescribe pain medication for him and it took his mouth about a month to heal. Wanting to prevent others from suffering his fate, Mattison sued Dragon Breath, its operating company, the local owner, the Haywood Mall and Simon Malls.

Seven-year-old Johnny McKenny suffered a severe asthma attack after trying Dragon Breath at a mall in Jacksonville, Florida, requiring him to have an epinephrine shot at a hospital. Doctors speculated that exposure to the cold air from the treat caused Johnny's bronchial tubes to spasm or react by filling with mucus, restricting his airway. The kiosk at the mall selling the Dragon Breath responded by adding an “allergy and asthma warning.”

Other similar incidents have been reported around the world. The health departments of several counties throughout the U.S. have issued warnings of the dangers of consuming Dragon Breath after learning of injuries.

So I wouldn't recommend trying this treat – it appears that the people issuing these warnings aren't just blowing smoke.

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