

# On the Trail of the Tylenol Terrorist

## The Story Behind the Safety Seal on Medicine Bottles

In 1982 a coldblooded murderer slipped cyanide into bottles of Tylenol, resulting in seven deaths. The entire nation was thrown into a panic that nearly spelled the end for Tylenol and many other medicines—and spawned “copycat” incidents that killed more. After 29 years with no convictions, is the FBI at last “On the Trail of the Tylenol Terrorist”?



- Aryeh Cohen

It all began with a common cold. It was early morning, September 27, 1982, when 12-year-old Mary Kellerman awoke with a runny nose and sore throat. She knocked on her parents' bedroom door to complain that she wasn't feeling well. Mrs. Kellerman went downstairs and brought her a capsule of Extra Strength Tylenol to relieve her symptoms.

At 7 AM Mrs. Kellerman found her daughter sprawled unconscious across the floor of her bedroom. Fighting back her panic, she called emergency services and the youngster was rushed to the hospital. It took doctors only a few minutes to report back with bad news: she was dead.

The initial analysis indicated that she had died of a stroke, something practically unheard of in a child. But further investigation suggested foul play. Something far more sinister had been involved in her sudden death.

That same day paramedics in Arlington Heights, Illinois, were called to care for a 27-year-old postal worker named Adam Janus. When they arrived they found him lying on the floor, his breathing heavy and labored. His eyes were swollen and his blood pressure was frighteningly low. They rushed him to the nearby Northwest Community Hospital where the doctors tried in vain to stabilize his condition, but it was too late. Janus succumbed to his unknown condition shortly after arriving.

The doctors attributed Janus' death to a massive heart attack, but again, a closer inspection would later reveal that something far more chilling was at play in his sudden death.

The family and friends of the stricken postal worker were shocked by the swift and unexpected loss of a young and energetic man. They gathered at his home that evening to grieve and discuss the funeral plans, and among those present were Adam's 25-year-old brother Stanley, and Stanley's wife. Both were suffering from pounding headaches, probably induced by the stress of the tragedy, and they helped themselves to the bottle of Extra Strength Tylenol they found

on Adam's kitchen table.

Within minutes both Stanley and his wife collapsed in an eerie replay of the tragedy that had taken Adam's life earlier that day. The paramedics were called once again to the Janus residence to save the young couple, but again they were unsuccessful. Stanley died that same day and his wife died two days later.

Three sudden deaths in one family were enough to set off alarm bells, and Dr. Thomas Kim of Northwest Community Hospital began to suspect at once that something was afoot. He and his colleagues speculated that there may have been carbon monoxide or a similar poison present in the Janus home, but Kim was not satisfied by this theory, so he sent blood samples of the victims for laboratory testing.

### A Fateful Meeting

A few days later, two close friends—both of them firefighters from different suburbs of Chicago—got together to enjoy a meal at a restaurant. One, Philip Cappitelli, told his friend, Richard Keyworth, about the tragedy of the young girl who had died suddenly after taking a Tylenol capsule. Keyworth responded with the sad story of three family members who had died suddenly on the same day.

"When did that happen?" Cappitelli asked.

"September 29," Keyworth answered.

"That's the same day that Kellerman girl died!"

"That's horrible! Four strange deaths in the same area on the same day. Hmmm... there may be some connection between them," Keyworth said.

"What?! Do you think the three from the Janus family all took Tylenol, and there's something wrong with that medicine?" Cappitelli asked in wonder.

"I don't know. Anything is possible."

Without wasting time, Cappitelli called one of the paramedics who had been called in to care for the stricken at the Janus home and asked whether the victims had taken

Tylenol. The paramedic responded in the affirmative. Cappitelli told the paramedic about the girl who had died the same day after ingesting the same pain reliever. Both of the men were shocked at their discovery and agreed that the authorities must be alerted at once.

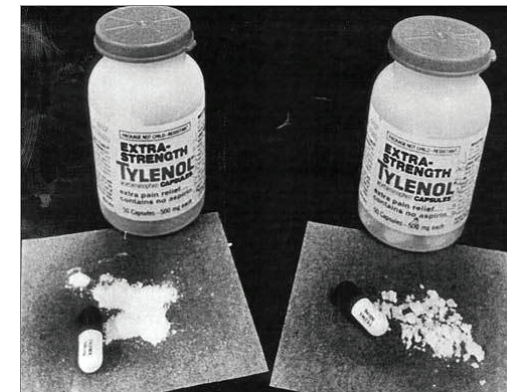
In a matter of minutes police cruisers were dispatched to both homes to pick up the suspect Tylenol pills and bring them in for further investigation.

Within days Cappitelli's and Keyworth's suspicion was confirmed by the laboratory. The chief toxicologist of Cook County, Illinois, confirmed that the capsules in the two bottles of Tylenol contained 65 milligrams of cyanide, about 10,000 times the dose that is fatal to humans. At the same time the laboratories that had checked the blood samples notified authorities of the results of their analysis: all four victims had died of cyanide poisoning.

### Public Reaction

Johnson & Johnson, the pharmaceutical company that manufactures Tylenol, was immediately notified of the discovery of cyanide in the capsules of two bottles of the medication. Rather than risk facing lawsuits, the company announced a recall on all bottles of Extra Strength Tylenol while simultaneously notifying leading medical officials, doctors, hospitals and wholesalers of the possibility of poison in Tylenol capsules and that the public should be warned to refrain from swallowing them.

Sadly, the warning came too late for the next three victims. A 27-year-old mother who was recovering from delivering her new baby unwittingly swallowed one of the cyanide-laced capsules and died a short while later. On the same day, a 35-year-old United Airlines flight attendant was found lifeless in her Chicago home. A search of the house turned up a bottle of poisoned Tylenol. Another 35-year-old woman was found dead in her home in Elmhurst, Illinois. All lived around Chicago and all had died from cyanide poisoning after taking Tylenol capsules.



Right: Tylenol capsules laced with cyanide. Note that the contents are coarsely granulated. Left: Pure Tylenol. Contents are fine and powdery.



Tylenol is removed from store shelves throughout America.

It didn't take long for the national media to report the string of Tylenol-related deaths. Panic broke loose around Chicago, and from there it spread across the land.

In Chicago police drove through the streets and announced over loudspeakers that people should avoid Tylenol capsules until further notice is given. People all over stopped whatever they were doing to take out their Tylenol bottles (who didn't have at least one in the house?) and set it aside or toss it into the garbage before someone in the family could be harmed.

Hospitals and poison control centers across Illinois were flooded with phone calls from people who had taken Tylenol and were frightened by the possibility of having been exposed to cyanide. Poison Control in Seattle, Washington, calmed the