

Print this Page

[Return to story](#)

## Slicing through spooky, but fake, urban legends LET'S GET REAL SCARY STORIES ARE COMMON TRICKS

October 26, 2007 12:36 am

BY EDIE GROSS  
BY EDIE GROSS

OK, so the craziest thing happened to a guy my hairdresser's husband works with.

He was in South America on business and decided to unwind in the hotel bar after a long day of meetings.

He remembers sipping a mojito at the bar while chatting with some locals--and then waking up the next morning in his hotel bathtub covered in ice.

He called the authorities, who rushed him to a local hospital. And there, he found out one of his kidneys had been removed!

Can you believe that?

Well, sort of.

That tiny bit of believability--after all, surgeons remove kidneys all the time, albeit usually with the donor's permission--is what makes the tale an enduring urban legend. And a scary one at that.

"The things that make urban legends last, it's the emotional impact and the plausibility," said David Emery, who writes about urban myths for About.com. "If it's *just* believable enough, people buy into it, and if people buy into it, they're likely to tell it."

The kidney-theft myth has been circulating on the Internet for at least 10 years, but has probably been around longer than that.

No "victims" have ever been identified, though the rumor may have started with a kernel of truth to it: In the late '80s, a Turkish man claimed his kidney was stolen during a physical he agreed to after being promised a job in England. He later admitted to selling the organ.

The idea that anyone could be a victim through no fault of his own likely fueled the spread of the tale,



For decades, urban legends have paired Halloween treats and razor blades, needles, poison. They prey on common 'stranger danger' fears.

according to Snopes.com, a Web site that tracks--and often debunks--urban myths.

Some of the most classic tales--razor blades tucked into candy, lollipops infused with hallucinogenic drugs--center around Halloween.

### MORE HYPE THAN HARM

Joel Best, a sociology professor at the University of Delaware, studied the candy-tampering phenomenon, plowing through news reports between 1958 and 2005 to see how widespread the problem really was.

The results: He found 89 reports of suspected candy-tampering but no evidence of any child being killed or injured by an item picked up during the course of trick-or-treating.

And even when pins and needles were discovered in candy, often it turned to be a prank--a kid tries to freak out his parents, a lady tries to scare off teen trick-or-treaters--rather than an intention to hurt someone, according to Snopes.com.

The fear generated by the myth is far greater than the actual danger, Best said. But that fear has changed the culture of the holiday.

Who doesn't check each piece of candy their child brings home to make sure the wrapping is tight? Some hospitals have even offered to X-ray candy to ease parents' minds.

And it's not uncommon these days for kids to trick-or-treat in broad daylight, or even indoors, for safety.

In some ways, it's easier to sell an urban myth that's aimed at children, said Phillips Stevens Jr., an associate professor of anthropology at the University at Buffalo-SUNY.

"Halloween's largely a children's event, even though in many areas, adults have taken it over," he said. "Parents everywhere overreact to any suggestion of danger to their children. This is part of our species."

### 'STRONG' MYTHS SURVIVE

Though the poisoned-candy tales picked up steam in the '60s and '70s, Best said he uncovered trick-or-treating myths going back to the 1940s.

Kids of that generation who went out on Halloween night sometimes heard tales of adults who heated pennies in a skillet and then poured the red-hot coins into the hands of unsuspecting trick-or-treaters, he said.

"The idea that there are evil grown-ups trying to hurt little kids goes back a ways," said Best. What keeps those stories alive, he said, is that they're not meant as mean-spirited hoaxes. They're well-intentioned warnings.

"That's the thing about contemporary legends--they're spread by word of mouth and believed by people as the truth. People telling a story think it's true, and the people hearing a story think it's true. Since the media don't really keep it alive, it has to be a good story--good enough that you remember it and you might want to tell it to somebody else," Best said. "They tend to be really disgusting. They also tend to be really frightening. That's the essence of an urban legend."

Nowadays, most urban myths are spread via e-mail and Web sites, said Emery of About.com.

Urban myths spread faster in the electronic age, but so do the facts that unravel them.

Recent additions to people's inboxes have included warnings that HIV-infected needles have been found attached to gas pumps or inside coin return slots (they haven't) and claims that TV psychic Sylvia Browne has predicted a mass murder at Kent State University this Halloween (she hasn't).

Emery said he's seen the "psychic predicts college Halloween massacre" myth before. It's been circulating for about 30 years, though the campus and the psychic have changed a few times.

The fear it stirs along with its tragic plausibility mean this urban legend could be around for a while, he said.

"You could almost look at it from an evolutionary standpoint," said Emery. "The strong stories survive the longest."

Eddie Gross: 540/374-5428

Email: [egross@freelancestar.com](mailto:egross@freelancestar.com)

---

**POISONED OR TAMPERED-WITH CANDY** The poisoned-candy myth has been around for decades but picked up steam in the early '80s after the well-publicized Tylenol poisonings left seven consumers dead. One Texas father was convicted of murder in 1975 after intentionally poisoning his son with cyanide-laced Pixie Stix, but random poisonings of trick-or-treaters have never been proven. University of Delaware sociology professor Joel Best studied newspaper articles dating back to 1958, and uncovered 89 reports of candy-tampering--nearly all of them pranks intended to scare rather than harm.

**LALA LOLLIPOPS** Parents were warned that schoolkids were being offered lollipops laced with hallucinogens. While the federal Drug Enforcement Administration did come across lollipops laced with THC, the main ingredient in marijuana, and PCP, also known as angel dust, they weren't being handed out to kids. Instead, they were being sold on the streets of Chicago to willing recipients.

**LSD TATTOOS** This one dates back to the '70s and alleges that LSD-soaked lick-and-stick tattoos in the shape of blue stars or cartoon characters were being sold to kids. No verifiable cases have ever been reported.

**EXPLODING GUT** This might be one of the most famous urban legends out there, that downing Pop Rocks candy and soda at the same time will cause your stomach to explode. The most famous alleged victim was Mikey, the freckled kid in the LIFE cereal commercials, who supposedly ate six packs of the candy followed by six Pepsis and then died in a gaseous cloud of sugar and carbonated bubbles. In fact, he's still alive. And combining Pop Rocks and soda isn't any more lethal than milk and cookies.

**KIDNEYS ON ICE** This myth warns of an organ-theft ring that preys largely on travelers. A businessman (you could also insert "college student" or "tourist") is enjoying a drink in a hotel bar, but suddenly wakes up hours later in a bathtub full of ice. In the interim, he was drugged and one of his kidneys was surgically removed. Snopes.com and urban legends expert Jan Harold Brunvand date the tale back to 1991. According to Snopes, in an effort to verify the claims the National Kidney Foundation asked victims to step forward. No one ever did.

**HALLOWEEN MASSACRE** This rumor's been around for nearly three decades in one fashion or another. The premise is that a well-known psychic has predicted a Halloween massacre on a U.S. college campus. For years, the psychic named was usually Jeanne Dixon. On occasion, Nostradamus got the credit. The latest incarnation claims that TV psychic Sylvia Browne predicted on "The Montel Williams" show that a mass murderer would strike Kent State this Halloween. Browne has denied ever making such a prediction.

**NEEDLES AT GAS PUMPS** This one made the rounds via e-mail, warning folks that HIV-infected needles had been found attached to gas pumps (or inside coin-return slots) so that customers would get stuck--and possibly infected with a deadly disease--while trying to fill their tanks. Snopes.com labels it a hoax designed to prey on people's fears of contracting AIDS.

**HOOK MAN** Two teens park on lovers lane for a make-out session when the radio broadcasts an announcement about a convicted murderer who has just escaped from a nearby insane asylum. Citizens, the announcer says, should be able to spot him because he's got a hook where his right hand should be. The girl wants to leave. The boy doesn't. They argue about it, and eventually the boy throws the car in gear and drives his date home. But when he comes around to the passenger side to let her out, much to his horror, he spots a bloody hook dangling from the door handle. Folklorists say the story was likely designed to discourage kids from "parking." There have been actual cases of couples being attacked or killed while parked in isolated spots--but not by hook-handed assailants. Brunvand also (wisely) points out that folks at the insane asylum probably wouldn't have fitted a convicted murderer with a prosthetic hook.

**BLOODY MARY** Coming to a slumber party near you Kids, often on a dare, would lock themselves in a dark bathroom, stare into the mirror and repeat "Bloody Mary" three times. Legend has it that the ritual would awaken the spirit of a not-so-merry Mary, who would then take revenge on the offending kid in some unspecified but horrific manner. In reality, Mary usually keeps to herself, but the game succeeds in scaring the bejesus out of the participants.

Information for this report was gathered from Snopes.com, UrbanLegends.About.com, urban legends expert Jan Harold Brunvand, University of Delaware sociology professor Joel Best and Discovery Channel's "MythBusters."

---

Copyright 2007 The Free Lance-Star Publishing Company.