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Toy tests detect lead and chemicals



ROBERT CHASE, THE ANN ARBOR NEWS
Mike Shriberg, policy director for the Ecology Center, uses an X-ray device to test toys for lead and other toxic materials. The Ann Arbor-based center coordinated the testing of more than 1,200 toys and found that 35 percent of them contained lead.

Ecology Center drives big study

BY AMANDA HAMON
The Ann Arbor News

A new national study released today that raises questions about the toxicity of toys and other children's products was coordinated by the Ecology Center in Ann Arbor.

The center teamed with 11 other public-interest groups around the country to conduct the first comprehensive tests of toxicity on more than 1,200 toys commonly sold to children under the age of 3.

The study found that 35 percent of the tested toys contained lead, and 17 percent contained lead above the federal recall level for lead paint. More than one-third contained some kind of harmful substance, said Mike Shriberg the Ecology Center's policy director.

Toy industry representatives say the study is unduly alarmist, while federal regulators say they are studying the results and more recalls are possible in the wake of numerous recalls earlier this year for tainted toys.

Many of the recalled products were manufactured outside the United States, particularly China, but Shriberg says the Ecology Center study found that toys manufactured everywhere were contaminated.

"We wanted to make this information

Results

Test results are available online at www.healthytoys.org.

available to spur the government into acting to protect children from toxic chemicals," Shriberg said.

The Web site allows consumers to search for toys by name, brand and type. It offers rankings that reflect the level of different contaminants in the tested toys. Consumers can use the site's contact forms to send messages to toy manufacturers and the government, and users can nominate toys to be tested in the future.

Shriberg said the site will be updated once a week until Christmas and then periodically after that.

Jewelry products were the most likely to contain the high levels of lead, which has been linked to behavioral problems and decreases in IQ. About one-third of the tested jewelry contained lead at levels greater than 600 parts per million - the amount that would trigger further testing by the Consumer Product Safety

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Test data is alarmist, toy industry says

Commission.

Among the toys that tested above that limit was a Hannah Montana Pop Star Card Game, which had a case that tested at 3,056 ppm.

CPSC spokesman Scott Wolfson said more lead-related recalls are expected this week, and the groups' findings will be reviewed. "We will take seriously reports and findings that come into us from state agencies and outside consumer groups," he said.

Toy manufacturers say that although products such as backpacks and lunchboxes may have lead in them, it isn't accessible to children and thus doesn't pose a risk — a view reinforced by the CPSC. Based on tests of more than 60 lunchboxes, the agency concluded that children would only absorb lead from a lunchbox if they rubbed it and then licked their hands more than 600 times a day for about 15 to 30 days. However, the agency has also recommended that manufacturers look for nontoxic alternatives, Wolfson said.

Joan Lawrence, vice president of standards and government relations for the Toy Industry Association, said that while the environmental groups' study used state-of-the-art technology to detect lead, they were presenting "scary information to parents without context."

"They can't tell you whether a child will be exposed" to

a chemical, she said.

Whether children can access lead in children's products may soon be moot. The House is expected to take up legislation this week that would ban lead from children's products, including metal jewelry and vinyl goods, regardless of accessibility.

The tests for the latest study were conducted in several states. Toys were chosen based on several factors, including common usage and the likelihood for children to put them in their mouths, said Ecology Center lead tester Jeff Gearhart.

"We can't test every toy, but we want to be responsive to consumers' concerns," Gearhart said. "We think it'll be an important and useful thing for folks."

Gearhart, Shriberg and their team of testers used a portable X-ray device to determine the elemental composition of the toys and their components. The device is more accurate than home lead tests, Shriberg said.

The study's results speak to a failure by the government and by toy manufacturers to properly protect consumers, Shriberg said.

"Clearly, the toy manufacturers are not doing a very good job of keeping these things off shelves, because we found chemicals in one-fourth of the (tested) toys," Shriberg said.

The federal government

doesn't require toy manufacturers to label what chemicals are in their products. Mandated government recalls are rare because of a lack of clear limits on chemicals in toys. Instead, the Consumer Product Safety Commission often works with manufacturers to conduct voluntary recalls when products are found to be unsafe.

According to the commission's 2007 performance and accountability report, the number of voluntary toy recalls this year — 472 — is the highest in the past 10 years.

Because of unclear federal laws, it's hard to say what levels of chemicals are safe or unsafe, Shriberg said.

"It's a question of how much risk a parent wants to expose a child to," Shriberg said. "Our answer is that parents shouldn't have to make that decision."

Shriberg is optimistic that even if the government stalls in its toy safety laws, the Ecology Center study will lead to parents becoming more informed about what they buy their children.

"This site is one step in a broader movement from parents and consumers to keep toxic chemicals out of toys," he said.

The Associated Press and The Washington Post contributed to this report. Amanda Hamon can be reached at 734-994-6852 or ahamon@annarbornews.com.