

Toxic Levels of Lead in Toy Jewelry Spur Recall

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BY STEPHANIE ZIMMERMANN AND GARY WISBY Staff Reporters

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The federal government will announce a recall today of 150 million pieces of toy jewelry sold in hundreds of thousands of bubblegum-type vending machines because the trinkets can contain toxic lead that poses a danger to kids.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission is implementing the voluntary recall, which was agreed to by four toy jewelry importers that supply 90 percent of all the gumball machine jewelry in the country. The CPSC is urging parents to go through their children's jewelry boxes and junk drawers and throw out any toy jewelry they find.

The recall was prompted by CPSC tests on vending machine jewelry. The agency did not say how many items were tested in total but said it used the results from 10 of the pieces to convince the importers that the jewelry they were selling was unsafe, said CPSC spokesman Ken Giles.

The Chicago Sun-Times conducted its own tests on bubblegum machine jewelry in early June, using a private environmental testing lab. The tests found that 12 of 16 items purchased from machines around the city -- or 75 percent -- contained toxic levels of lead.

Eight of the items in the Sun-Times tests had lead levels of 180,000 parts per million or higher. There is no government standard for lead content in children's jewelry as long as it's coated and there is "no accessible lead," a standard questioned by some private safety experts. By comparison, soil is considered dangerous when lead levels reach 400 parts per million, and lead paint is considered dangerous at 600 parts per million.

Even in small amounts, lead can cause irreversible neurological damage, delayed physical and mental development and attention and learning problems. At lower doses, it often isn't clear lead poisoning is occurring until the damage is done.

The jewelry sellers have said the items are coated to prevent the lead from leaching out. But the CPSC said its tests showed the lead does leach out and is a concern for children who suck on or swallow the items. The agency knows of two children who were poisoned by lead jewelry in recent years.

"I don't think this is a cause for alarm, but we're doing what we can and the industry is doing what they can to prevent additional exposure to lead," Giles said.

Meanwhile, the California attorney general last month filed suit against 13 major retailers, alleging they broke state law by failing to warn consumers some of the jewelry they sell contains lead.

Companies named in the California lawsuit, which focused on costume jewelry primarily marketed to teens and children, were Macy's, Target, Wal-Mart, Kmart, J.C. Penney, Mervyn's, Nordstrom, Ross, Sears, Express, Claire's, Toys R Us and Burlington Coat Factory. Retailers have said they don't manufacture the items and are trying to find which specific products are a problem.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) applauded the CPSC recall and the Sun-Times tests.

"I'm still concerned that [similar products] are still available in other kinds of venues, but this is a great victory for children and their parents" Schakowsky said.

The voluntary recall covers about 150 million rings, necklaces and bracelets in various styles and affects virtually all of the bubblegum machine jewelry in the United States, Giles said.

The National Bulk Vendors Association issued a statement saying its member operators will get rid of the jewelry "as quickly as possible" and certainly within 30 days.