

Feds Continue Recalls Of Cadmium-Tainted Jewelry

Justin Pritchard, Associated Press Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Federal safety regulators recalled a line of Christmas-themed bracelets Thursday, expanding their effort to purge children's jewelry boxes and store shelves of items containing high levels of the toxic metal cadmium.

The latest action by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission targeted "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" charm bracelets that released alarmingly high levels of cadmium in government lab tests, suggesting children could be exposed to a carcinogen that also can damage kidneys and bones.

The chain-link bracelets were sold at dollar-type stores between 2006 and March 2009 and feature characters from the classic holiday movie, including Rudolph and the abominable snowman, as well as snowflakes and candy canes. The agency said parents should immediately take the bracelets from kids and throw them away.

It was the second cadmium-related recall by the government since an Associated Press investigation earlier this year found that some children's jewelry, including the Rudolph charms, was made almost entirely with the heavy metal.

The commission said the recall may not be the government's last action as it continues to investigate items highlighted in AP's investigation. But while the full extent of cadmium's presence in children's jewelry is not known, the CPSC is apparently not conducting wider market surveillance to see what other items on store shelves may prompt concern.

The agency said in its announcement that there have been no known cadmium poisonings associated with the bracelets.

A trade group representing the jewelry industry reiterated its belief Thursday that its products pose no risk. Cadmium poisoning in children has not been widely studied or looked for, and the agency said it is interested in receiving any reports of incidents or injuries.

In their investigation, agency scientists bathed the abominable snowman charm in a liquid that simulates stomach acid to assess how much cadmium a child who swallowed it could be exposed to. It shed more than 20,000 micrograms of the metal in 24 hours; that translates into more cadmium than World Health Organization guidelines deem a safe exposure over 86 weeks for a 33-pound child.

"That's a hell of a lot of cadmium coming off," said Dr. Paul Mushak, a toxicologist in North Carolina specializing in risk assessment of toxic metals who has worked with the safety commission on other issues. He also noted that young children could

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

ingest a steady, lower-level dose of cadmium when they suck, bite or chew on such items.

Mushak applauded the recall, but suggested the current system isn't working and that broader regulatory reforms are needed. Legislators at the state and federal level have proposed a zero-tolerance policy for cadmium in children's jewelry.

"This crap has to be off the market," Mushak said, "and I think it's outrageous that there's this endless, endless litany of highly toxic stuff coming down the marketplace and CPSC is essentially saying, 'OK, we'll get to that one, too.'"

Lead was long the favored metal for cheap jewelry; now that federal law tightly restricts how much lead can be used in children jewelry, some manufacturers are using cadmium.

Cadmium emerged as a safety concern earlier this year after the AP investigation revealed that lab tests conducted on 103 pieces of low-priced children's jewelry found 12 items with cadmium content above 10 percent of the total weight. All were made in China. In the testing done for AP, the Rudolph charm contained 91 percent cadmium.

Safety regulators weren't able to determine how many of the Rudolph bracelets may still be on store shelves, or how many have been sold because the company that imported them from China is no longer in business. That company — Buy-Rite Designs, Inc. of Freehold, N.J. — was the subject of two separate charm bracelet recalls in 2007 due to high lead content.

Agency testing on items identified by AP began about two months ago. The fact that Buy-Rite no longer exists hindered the CPSC's investigation, agency spokesman Scott Wolfson said.

Buy-Rite was sold several years ago to a group of venture capital firms, according to several former employees, including its former owner. Officials at the only firm that AP contacted which acknowledged being part of the deal, Chicago-based Prairie Capital LP, did not respond to requests for comment.

One place that sold the Rudolph bracelets as late as November is the Dollar N More store in Rochester, N.Y., where owner Elizabeth Salamone said she will happily remove any jewelry found to be hazardous but knows little about what's in the items she stocks.

She said she tosses any necklaces found to contain dangerous materials into a cardboard box she keeps in the storeroom — it now contains several dozen items.

"Am I supposed to throw them in the trash? I don't know. Is there going to be some place to drop off all the metal? I don't know where to put it," she said while tending the cash register as a glut of lunchtime customers streamed into her store.

Several major retailers have started demanding lab results that show items contain

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no cadmium before they will purchase them from jewelry manufacturers or importers, a push that has upset the trade group, which represents more than 200 jewelry producers, suppliers and retailers.

That group, the Fashion Jewelry and Accessory Trade Association, has downplayed AP's findings and in a statement Thursday said "cadmium is not being widely substituted for lead" and that children's jewelry is safe. The association said it has formed a safety "task force" and is working to develop a voluntary standard for cadmium levels.

"Available data indicates that children's jewelry does not contain levels of cadmium that could cause health risks," said Michael Gale, the association's executive director. "If there are isolated cases where a potential concern exists, the Consumer Product Safety Commission has the ability to follow established processes to address the issue."

The commission has acted aggressively in recent months after several years of ignoring scattered test results provided by consumer advocates that showed high levels of cadmium in children's jewelry. Agency officials have said they had to focus their limited resources on the dangers posed by lead in children's jewelry and faulty products such as cribs.

The commission's current efforts have included guidance from its chairman that parents should toss any piece of inexpensive metal jewelry, noting that children who chew, suck on or swallow a piece of jewelry may be exposing themselves to cadmium or lead.

Associated Press Writer Ben Dobbin in Rochester, N.Y., contributed to this report.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/31/2015 - 11:10am):

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