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Unsafe Concentrations of Lead in Children's Toys Distributed by Libraries— Summer 2006

Background

Bendable dog and cat toys given away at many public libraries this summer might contain unsafe levels of lead. The toys were distributed as part of a statewide summer reading program at public libraries throughout Alaska, and in at least 30 other states nationwide. A library in Indiana discovered the problem during the first week of August after a librarian attended a lead-testing event at a local hospital and decided to have the toys tested.

Approximately 72 Alaska libraries obtained about 2,400 toys this summer. It is currently not known how many toys were given away to children. The rubbery toys are roughly four inches long, with round heads and long bendable arms and legs (Figure). They come in various colors. The toys are stamped "Made in China" on the back of the head.

The company that supplies the toys to libraries, Highsmith Inc., of Fort Atkinson, WI, has issued a voluntary recall of the product.

Tests on three of these toys at two separate laboratories found concentrations ranging from 0.24 to 0.4 percent lead. The Code of Federal Regulations, Title 16, Section 1303 stipulates that lead may constitute no more than 0.06 percent of the weight of the paint applied to a toy.

Figure. Bendable rubber toys distributed to children by approximately 72 Alaska public libraries—Summer 2006.*



*Photo courtesy of Ryan Fagan, MD, MPH.

The main risk posed by these toys is the possibility that children might chew on them or swallow part of the toy, and thereby absorb unsafe amounts of lead into the bloodstream. The toys are not hazardous to touch.

Children are more vulnerable to lead poisoning than adults and exposure is especially dangerous for younger children. A child who swallows large amounts of lead may develop anemia, abdominal cramps, muscle weakness, and brain damage. Even at much lower levels of exposure, lead can affect a child's mental and physical growth. Due to these risks to children, parents have been encouraged to consult with a health-care provider if they think their child has swallowed any portion of the toys.

Further investigations are ongoing to determine if similar toys from China sold by other distributors also contain unsafe concentrations of lead.

Recommendations

1. Children who have chewed on or swallowed some of the toy should be evaluated for lead exposure. Because most children with recent or lower levels of exposure will be asymptomatic, blood testing should be performed as part of this evaluation.
2. Parents whose children have the toys should return them to the library where they were obtained; local libraries will send them to a central collection facility for safe disposal.
3. Immediately notify the Section of Epidemiology of any child with a blood lead level ≥ 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dl}$. Call 907-269-8000 Monday through Friday 8AM-5PM or 800-478-0084 after hours.

Additional Resources

Additional information on the hazards of lead exposure can be obtained from the following resources:

1. <http://www.cdc.gov/lead/>
2. <http://www.epa.gov/lead/>
3. Environmental Public Health program at 907-269-8000, Monday through Friday, 8AM-5PM.
4. Oregon Poison Control Center at 800-222-1222, 24-hours a day.