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Plastic Easter eggs linked to lead paint

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By Thomas J. Sheeran, Associated Press Writer

CLEVELAND — A chemistry professor who raised an earlier warning flag about toxic lead levels in toy jewelry didn't have to look far for evidence of similar risks in Easter items such as plastic eggs.

Thirteen of 45 items purchased off store shelves and tested by Ashland University chemistry students had paint made with lead, according to Jeffrey D. Weidenhamer, who has made the toy testing an annual spring rite for his students.

Lead, a highly toxic element, can cause severe nerve damage, especially in children.

Two years ago Weidenhamer and his students produced a low-profile study showing many common toys and trinkets, most made in China, had hazardous lead levels. The next round of testing last year got more attention as the issue of tainted Chinese products including toys, pet food and toothpaste made headlines.

"It certainly demonstrates that the problem is still there," Weidenhamer said.

At Ashland, the biggest lead hazards were found in Easter egg spinning tops, plastic Easter eggs that typically are filled at home with treats, bunny hair clips and chick-style sipper cups -- all exceeding the government paint standard of 0.06 percent lead content.

The Easter egg containers and tops were sold at a Hobby Lobby outlet in Mansfield.

Hobby Lobby has directed stores to pull the items from shelves, said Vince Parker, director of training and customer service for the Oklahoma City-based chain. It also is doing additional testing on the products and cooperating with the federal Consumer Product Safety Commission to initiate a recall.

Weidenhamer said the toys with lead-based paint would pose only a small risk if the paint doesn't chip and the item is discarded before it deteriorates. Still, the risk "is not negligible because of the high toxicity of lead," he said.

The biggest lead risk to children comes from homes, usually older ones which have lead paint that can chip and be ingested, Weidenhamer said.

Congress has weighed in on the issue, passing legislation to ban lead in toys as part of a bill to reauthorize the CPSC, which handles product recalls. House and Senate versions are awaiting a conference committee to resolve differences.

Sen. Sherrod Brown, an Ohio Democrat and commission critic who has kept up with the Ashland research, asked the CPSC in a letter Thursday to review the campus work.

"Consumers believe the government is looking out for them," he told The Associated Press. "The government hasn't done its job."

Julie Vallese, a commission spokeswoman, said watching out for lead in toys is a priority. She said Ashland's past research, doubled-checked by the commission, has led to recalls.

Melissa Ciacchi, 21, an Ashland senior from Galena near Columbus, participated in the class project and was surprised by the results.

With consumers often unaware of the lead content of items used by children, Ciacchi said parents must be alert to the risks. "Monitor your children. If you've got smaller children, don't let your kids put it in their mouths," she said.

About 310,000 U.S. children ages 1 to 5, or less than 2 percent of that population, have blood lead levels that require treatment or other measures, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Most get it from paint chips and dust in old buildings.

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