

Shoppers shrug off fears about toxic reusable bags

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Barbara Redcay loads a reusable grocery bag into her vehicle after shopping at a store in Clarence, N.Y., Wednesday, Nov. 17, 2010. U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer of New York is seeking a federal investigation following a newspaper report of lead content in some reusable grocery bags. (AP Photo/David Duprey)

(AP) -- So you care about the environment, and you take a reusable shopping bag with you to the grocery store to avoid polluting the planet with countless plastic sacks. Now you find out your bag is made with potentially harmful lead. What's an environmentalist to do?

If you're like Elnora Cooper, nothing.

"I'm not eating the bag ... and I'm not going to get rid of it," Cooper, 68, said with a chuckle after walking out of a Wegmans Food Markets store in Rochester this week with a reusable bag under her arm.

The latest in a long line of ominous warnings about potentially dangerous products concerns synthetic but reusable bags that may contain traces of lead. The stir in supermarkets and Congress is less about whether the [toxin](#) might rub off on food and more about whether they could accumulate in landfills and create an environmental hazard.

But since the whole point of the bags is that they're to be kept, not tossed out, and because the concentration of lead in them is so low, some shoppers are convinced there's little risk of an imminent toxic catastrophe.

"I switched to reusable bags six or seven years ago to keep plastic out of landfills," said Cooper, a retired nurse. "I'll keep using the one with the lead, truthfully, before I start using plastic again."

The Rochester-based Wegmans chain of 77 stores in several Eastern states halted sales of two styles of reusable bags in September after tests by a local environmental group found they contained potentially unsafe levels of lead. Wegmans said there's no evidence the 750,000 bags it sold pose a health threat.

"The eventual disposal of the bags is the only issue, from an environmental perspective," said spokeswoman Jo Natale, urging customers to return the bags for replacement when they're no longer useful.

The company, which has sold an estimated 4.5 million reusable bags at

its stores in five states, has not decided yet how it will dispose of returned bags.

Lead can cause learning disabilities in children and fertility problems in adults if ingested.

A recent investigation by The Tampa Tribune found excessive amounts of lead in reusable bags bought at Winn-Dixie and other major retailers. The lead appears to be in a form that's not easily extracted or "leached" out.

But over time in a landfill, laboratory experts told the newspaper, the bags break down and paint can flake off. Lead was used in the paint to add color, opaqueness and durability; it has been banned in wall paint in the U.S. since the late 1970s.

Sen. Charles Schumer, a New York Democrat, on Sunday called on the Food and Drug Administration to open an investigation into the bags.

"When our families go to the [grocery store](#) looking for safe and healthy foods to feed their kids, the last thing they should have to worry about are toxic bags," he said.

The next day, Long Island chain King Kullen and Jacksonville, Fla.-based Winn-Dixie said they were pulling some brands of reusable bags. Winn-Dixie and Tampa-based Publix are asking suppliers to find ways to make reusable grocery bags with less lead.

Reusable bags, mostly made in China, account for about 10 percent to 15 percent of the U.S. market of grocery bags. Wegmans' Chinese-made "green pea" and "holiday 2009" bags had lead levels seven to eight times higher than allowed under New York state packaging regulations.

But after they were removed, tests for "leachable lead levels" came back at less than 0.1 parts per million, said Kathleen O'Donnell, Wegmans' chief food scientist.

"That level is classified as a non-hazardous waste and could go into any landfill," she said.

Dr. John Rosen, a lead poisoning specialist at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore in New York City, said any source of lead exposure, no matter how small, should be eliminated if possible.

"I haven't seen any numbers on the lead concentration in shopping bags, but for my own grandchildren's safety, I'd say to my daughters, 'Don't use them,'" Rosen said.

The bags join other pilloried consumer goods that have raised eyebrows recently, such as children's jewelry and Shrek-themed novelty glasses that contained cadmium.

To Beth Lavigne, the bag brouhaha sounds more like "a blip."

"If there's a problem, they'll get it fixed. ... It won't be an issue anymore," said Lavigne, 61, a college administrator who owns a dozen reusable bags. "Reusables are a good idea. But who knows what's in the plastic bags?"

Mary Siegrist, an 81-year-old former teacher, said as she queued up at a Wegmans deli counter that she was all for studying the issue.

"In other countries, things have to be proven to be safe before being put into circulation," she said. "Here, we put it into circulation and then find out later it's unsafe."

Anyone concerned about the possibility of lead in their shopping bags can rest easy if they use cotton canvas bags rather than the more colorful synthetic type, said Russ Haven of the New York Public Interest Research Group in Albany.

"At this point," he said, "the canvas bags have a clean bill of health."

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