

Purses, wallets contain excessive amounts of lead, group says

April 9 2009, By Suzanne Bohan

In its quest to rid consumer products of a potent neurotoxin, an Oakland environmental group on Tuesday warned nearly 20 major retailers and manufacturers that they're selling women's purses, wallets, tote bags and other accessories with lead levels exceeding California state standards.

The products were made of vinyl or faux leather, and were purchased at Bay Area outlets of major retailers such as Wal-Mart, Macy's, Whole Foods Market, Target, Sears and JCPenney. Of 21 retailers visited, only five didn't sell products exceeding state [lead](#) levels for these products, said Caroline Cox, research director for the Center for Environmental Health, which conducted the testing.

"With safer materials available, there's no reason that anyone should be selling these lead-tainted products," Cox said.

Yellow-colored products, or those blended with yellow to yield such colors as orange and green, were the worst offenders, suggesting some yellow dyes contain especially high [lead levels](#), Cox said.

"Black is a safer color," she said. Cox also advised purchasing products made of natural material such as canvas or leather as a way to avoid potential exposure to lead in women's accessories.

Jim Sluzewski, a spokesman with Macy's, said the company hadn't received any reports of adverse health effects from lead in these products. He also said Macy's expects its suppliers to maintain in

compliance with state laws.

"Saying this, we are taking the Center for Environmental Health's claims very seriously and will work with our suppliers to address the issue," Sluzewski said.

Calls to Wal-Mart were not returned by midafternoon Tuesday.

Recent studies report that lead has health effects at even lower levels than previously thought. One study, published by the National Institutes of Health, reported new findings on neurological damage in unborn children. In adults, lead exposure is associated with increased risk of [cardiovascular disease](#) and certain cancers, as well as memory impairment.

Cox said women using these accessories can ingest lead in them through hand-to-mouth contact, and their children may chew on these products as well.

Handbags and wallets are also frequently used by women, she added. "We touch them all the time."

In March and April, Cox and others purchased dozens of women's purses, wallets, totes, makeup bags and coin holders at Bay Area stores, primarily in the East Bay. Its report on this latest testing campaign, "Pretty but Poisonous: Lead in Handbags and Wallets," is available at www.ceh.org.

The companies have 60 days to respond to the legal notice, after which the Oakland group can file a lawsuit to force compliance with Proposition 65 and seek substantial penalties. Proposition 65 requires that businesses post warnings when selling products containing any of the hundreds of substances listed as causing cancer or reproductive harm.

Charles Margulis, a spokesman for the Oakland environmental group, said in similar actions in the past, such as one against children's lunchbox manufacturers, his organization has settled with defendants, who agree to stop selling products containing lead.

LEAD AND YOUR HEALTH

Lead serves no useful purpose in the body and it can cause serious and permanent health problems.

- Lead enters the body by being inhaled or swallowed, after which it's absorbed into the bloodstream.
- About half of the lead is eliminated, but the remaining lead is stored in bones.
- Lead in bone is gradually released back into the bloodstream over time. Because lead is stored in the bones, exposure to even small amounts can be harmful.
- Lead damages the brain, nerves, red blood cells, kidneys and reproductive systems of men and women.
- Lead easily crosses the placenta in a pregnant woman and can harm the fetus.

Source: State of California

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