NY senator calls for cadmium ban in kids' jewelry

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In this Dec. 17, 2009 photo, Jeff Weidenhamer, professor of chemistry at Ashland University, holds a "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer", charm in Ashland, Ohio. Barred from using lead in children's jewelry because of its toxicity, some Chinese manufacturers have been substituting the more dangerous heavy metal cadmium in sparkling charm bracelets and shiny pendants being sold throughout the United States, an Associated Press investigation shows. (AP Photo/Tony Dejak)

(AP) -- Reports of high cadmium content in children's jewelry imported from China have prompted a senior U.S. senator to press for legislation that would ban the toxic heavy metal as a hazardous substance from those products and toys.

New York Democrat Charles E. Schumer was to present details of his proposal Wednesday. It is the first specific legislative fix promised by a

member of Congress following an Associated Press investigation that documented high levels of cadmium in jewelry bought at major chain stores in the United States.

Cadmium can hinder brain development in young children, according to recent research, and is known to cause cancer. Lab tests conducted for the AP on 103 pieces of low-priced children's jewelry found 12 items with cadmium content above 10 percent of the total weight. Some were as much as 90 percent cadmium.

"There is enough evidence about how dangerous this metal is that we must take action immediately so no more children are put in harm's way," Schumer said. "It's time to get this toxic metal out of children's jewelry and toys and keep it out."

Other members of Congress have suggested that legislation might be necessary. Congress passed a major consumer product safety overhaul in 2008, following a series of recalls of Chinese made goods. That law barred the use of lead in products for children under 12; in response, some Chinese jewelry manufacturers have turned to cadmium.

While the Consumer Product Safety Commission has the power to go after items with high cadmium content under the Federal Hazardous Substances Act, the agency has never pursued an enforcement action against a product based on that authority.

In an interview, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., said she wants to explore whether the CPSC has the power to limit cadmium in children's jewelry. If not, she said, "we'll have to turn to legislation."

Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., called word of cadmium in jewelry "alarming proof positive that more must be done to protect our families - especially children - from dangerous substances that end up in toys and

household items." He said he's drafting a bill that would shift responsibility to make industry, not government, responsible for proving that consumer chemicals are safe.

Several major retailers have not waited for guidance from government. Wal-Mart Stores Inc. pulled from store shelves several items cited in AP's report, including a charm bracelet and "The Princess and The Frog" pendants; on Tuesday, the jewelry and accessories store Claire's said it would stop selling a "Best Friends" charm bracelet.

Meanwhile, an official with China's product safety agency told AP it would examine the findings on cadmium contamination. "We just heard about this, and we will investigate," said Wang Xin, a director general for the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine.

Officials from two Chinese government-affiliated trade associations - the China Toy Association and the Gems and Jewelry Trade Association of China - said they had not received any instructions from Beijing to look into cadmium in children's jewelry.

"As far as we know, the big Chinese companies made technological innovation a few years ago, and lead, nickel and cadmium levels all met standards," said Shi Hongyue, secretary-general of Gems and Jewelry Trade Association. "We have over 1,000 member companies and we are still looking into the case."

An employee for the China Toy Association, who only gave her surname Qin, said the group hadn't received complaints from "toy-quality inspection departments of other countries."

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