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Toy recall raises lead awareness; beware of other lead dangers

Stanton~ Mattel's recent massive recall of millions of Chinese-made toys containing magnets and dangerous levels of lead paint has caused a great deal of concern, frustration and anger among parents.

“This recall has really gotten the attention of parents,” said Dr. Robert Graham, Medical Director for Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD), “but what most parents don't realize is that lead has been an existing problem in our community for years and testing those at-risk has been a top priority with Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MDHD).”

All three counties in MMDHD's jurisdiction (Clinton County, Gratiot County and Montcalm County) are considered high-risk when it comes to possible lead exposure, mostly because of the high concentration of older homes built prior to 1978 when using lead-based paint was still acceptable. Children are most often poisoned by lead dust and lead paint in older homes. The older the home, the more likely that windows, cupboards, doors, porches and outdoor surfaces contain lead-based paint.

Lead dust can come from repairing areas with lead paint, opening and closing windows and through normal wear and tear of painted areas. Lead dust settles to the floor and gets on children's hands and toys and enters their bodies when they put their hands or toys in their mouths.

Children are particularly vulnerable to lead poisoning because their developing bodies absorb lead more readily than adults' and are more likely to put their hands in their mouths after they have touched contaminated toys, floors, windowsills, or objects where lead settles after renovations.

The health department can't stress enough the importance of having every child under the age of six tested for lead poisoning. “We screen every child involved in the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program at twelve months and again at around twenty-four months and screen Head Start students as well” said Bonnie Havlicek, Community Health and Education Supervisor for MMDHD.

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“The health department tested 331 children in Montcalm County so far this year and have identified two lead-poisoned children,” continued Havlicek “The unsettling part is that there is an estimated 16,000 children in Michigan who are likely to suffer from lead poisoning; however, due to the lack of testing, they usually go undiagnosed.”

Lead poisoning disrupts crucial development processes in children, harms the central nervous system, and is associated with reduced IQ, learning and behavior problems, tiredness, headaches, hearing problems, weight loss, hyperactivity and irritability. In large doses it can cause coma, convulsions and death. Many children with elevated blood lead levels have no symptoms at all, which is why testing every child before their fourth birthday is so crucial.

The toy recall has served as a wake up call to the dangers of lead, but make no mistake—lead has been and continues to be a concern in our community. Lead poisoning is somewhat of a “silent” illness and the only way to know for sure is to be tested.

Therefore, MMDHD urges parents of all children under six years of age on Medicaid to call the health department at 989-831-5237 to schedule an appointment for a test. Those without insurance can have the test administered by the health department for a \$25 fee. Those children covered by private insurance are asked to consult with their primary care doctor for testing.

You may also visit MMDHD's website for more information at www.mmdhd.org.

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To determine if your child should be tested for lead poisoning, ask yourself these questions:

- Does your child have one or more toys included in the recent Mattel recall?
- Do you live in an area identified to be “high risk”?
- Does your child now or in the past live in or visit a home (daycare, preschool) built before 1978?
- Does your child now or in the past live in or visit a home that has been remodeled within the last year?
- Does your child have a sibling or playmate with lead poisoning?
- Does your child live with an adult whose job or hobby involves lead?
- Does your child now or in the past lived near a busy street or highway?
- Does your home’s plumbing have lead pipes or copper pipes with lead solder joints?

- Does your child’s family use any home remedies that contain lead (arzacón, greta)?

If you answered “yes” or “I don’t know” to any of these questions your child should be tested for lead poisoning.

Simple steps to take to help protect your children:

- Wash your child’s hands, bottles, pacifier and toys often.
- Keep floors, window sills and other surfaces dust and dirt free.
- Give your child healthy foods to eat which will help keep the lead from being absorbed
- Do not allow your child to play with jewelry, charms or other toys that may contain high levels of lead.

Mattel/Fisher-Price recall summary

The toy recall includes 967,000 Sesame Street and Dora the Explorer toys, and 253,000 “Sarge” jeeps from the movie “Cars” which may contain excessive levels of lead.

The recall also includes 7.3 million Polly Pocket dolls and accessories with magnets; 1 million Doggie Day Care play sets with magnets; 683,000 Barbie and Tanner play sets with magnets; and 345,000 Batman and One Piece action figures with magnets. The small powerful magnets can fall out, undetected to parents and caregivers and can be swallowed or aspirated by young children or placed by a child in their nose or ears. When more than one magnet is swallowed, they can attract to each other and cause intestinal perforation, infection or blockage, which can be fatal. Aspiration to the lungs requires immediate surgery. Magnets placed in the nose or ears can cause swelling and be difficult to remove.

Consumers should visit Mattel’s website at www.service.mattel.com for a complete list (including model numbers) of recalled products. Consumers should immediately take the recalled toys away from their children and contact Mattel or Fisher Price toll free at 800-916-4498 for instructions on how to return recalled product in exchange for a replacement voucher.