

Jan Drew: Where will this lead?

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Among childhood hazards, you won't find many that are scarier than lead.

Jan would dispute that!

Why worry about lead when we have 17 micrograms of mercury?

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Consumer Watch | Is your child's ring unleaded?

By Jeff Gelles

Inquirer Columnist

Among childhood hazards, you won't find many that are scarier than lead.

Even at low levels, exposure to this soft, heavy metal can diminish a child's intelligence, cause attention and behavioral problems, and impair hearing and growth.

Great progress has been made in reducing the danger of lead poisoning by eliminating it from gasoline and paint and by focusing on the special risks facing those who live in deteriorating, older houses and apartments.

Still, federal health officials estimate that close to half a million children ages 1 to 5 have clearly hazardous levels of lead in their blood – and they also point out that no level of lead is known to be "safe."

Why the brief lesson in toxicology?

The better to understand the jaw-dropping lunacy underlying this week's recall by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and four

importers of toy jewelry.

Since January 2002, these companies have sold about 150 million pieces of toy jewelry through vending machines all over the country – in malls, discount stores, groceries and the like.

If your kid ever bugged you for a couple of quarters and you mindlessly agreed, your family – particularly younger children prone to chewing or sucking on toys – may be at risk.

Why? Because roughly half of those 150 million trinkets were made with lead.

Up to 69 percent lead

Not just tiny amounts of lead, either. According to the CPSC, which tested 20 samples of the jewelry, 10 of them contained high lead levels. One item was 69 percent lead by weight.

The importers said they believed that a non-lead surface coating "made the lead inaccessible to children under reasonably foreseeable use," according to a statement released after the recall.

But the CPSC's tests on the products – designed to mimic the effects of handling, sucking and swallowing the jewelry – showed otherwise.

The coating was clearly of little use in the case that brought this type of jewelry to the agency's attention, in which an Oregon boy suffered lead poisoning after swallowing a toy pendant.

To their credit, now that the CPSC has identified the jewelry as hazardous, the companies are working to make amends.

They joined the agency in voluntarily recalling all the jewelry, even if half of it was lead-free, and urging parents to search their houses for the toys.

They said they were moving quickly to remove the last two million of the rings, necklaces and bracelets from machines, where they sold for 25 to 75 cents apiece.

They've also formed the Safe Jewelry Council, to "bring a national focus within the industry on the continued safe importation, distribution and sale of toy jewelry."

"The safety of children remains the importers' number one concern and priority," the companies said.

A foolish decision

If you're skeptical about where safety falls on their priority list, that makes two of us. It's hard to imagine anything as risky and foolish as taking a hazardous substance, coated or not, and using it to make baubles targeted at little children.

But the companies aren't alone in deserving blame. The jewelry recall also raises troubling questions about the effectiveness of our regulatory system.

Ken Giles, a CPSC spokesman, says the agency's policy is that "there should not be any accessible lead in a child's product."

How can consumers trust that there isn't?

"The underlying expectation is that industry is doing its own testing, so that they are in compliance and are not putting hazardous materials into the market," Giles says.

For now, the industry has assured the CPSC that it won't import any more lead jewelry until it can meet the agency's testing standards.

A better conclusion would be to give up on using this highly toxic metal in children's toys.

Why take such an utterly pointless risk?

(For more information on the recall, go to www.cpsc.gov.)