



Lead poisoning tough to diagnose

Fisher-Price recall prompts some parents to toss toys that might contain lead in paint

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Alicia Martell is kicking soccer Elmo out of her Thornhill home.

The toy, cuddled each night by her 2-year-old, Isabella, is one of 83 types of Fisher-Price toys recalled yesterday over concerns their paint contains excessive amounts of lead.

"My baby likes to sleep with that toy," the mother of three said in an interview yesterday. "That makes me nervous."

News of the massive recall (service.mattel.com/us/recall.asp) swept like wildfire through her mothers' network yesterday morning and Martell received 15 emails from friends warning her to check.

After consulting the list, she found her child's toy was among the 83 items named.

Although she'll throw the plaything out, Martell isn't panicking.

"It won't stop me from buying Fisher-Price toys. It's always something. There are always recalls, such as car seats. This is just the first time it is something that I actually had."

Experts agree with Martell's way of the handling the latest warning regarding lead.

"Take the toy away but you don't particularly have to panic," says Dr. Margaret Thompson, medical director of the Ontario Poison Centre.

Toys to cuddle aren't a problem, she says, but toys that a child puts in his or her mouth pose a greater risk.

"Saliva in the mouth breaks down the lead so that it can be absorbed," she says "If you have a little Dora statue that is devoid of all paint, that is the child we need to worry about."

Lead is linked to brain damage and blood disorders, such as anemia, and is banned from paints in Canada.

If a child has sucked much of the paint off a toy, Thompson recommends a visit to the family doctor where a blood test can determine blood lead levels.

Chelation therapy – medication that causes the lead to be excreted – is used to treat severe lead poisoning, says Thompson, adding this is extremely rare in Canada, with only five cases in the past six years. Of those cases, none were caused by toys for children, she says.

A child from Alberta died three years ago after swallowing a lead pendant that lodged in her stomach.

Dr. Lennox Huang, pediatric intensive care specialist at McMaster Children's Hospital in Hamilton, says it is rare to see a child with lead poisoning and that in his three years at the hospital – the second largest children's hospital in Ontario – he has not seen one.

Lead levels in the general population used to be much higher than today, he says, because of fumes from lead-based gasoline. As well, paints now are made without lead.

Both initiatives to remove lead from the products were the result of rising health concerns that lead caused brain damage, especially in children.

Lead presents much greater risks to children, he says, because they are inquisitive and still growing.

"One of the challenges of parents is that everything goes straight into their mouths," says Huang.

"They use their mouth to explore their environment."

Lead poisoning is difficult to diagnose. "Most children have no symptoms at all."

Moderate to severe cases result in a drop in IQ, poor school performance

and, in the worst cases, coma.

"If caught early, children have a great prognosis of being successful, normal children," says Huang.

Kathleen Cooper, senior researcher with the Canadian Environmental Law Association, has been fighting to keep lead out of our environment for almost 20 years. The biggest concern has always been around pregnant women and preschoolers.

"Children will absorb 50 per cent of lead ingested, as opposed to adults who absorb only 10 per cent. As well, children will keep it in their bodies, where adults will store it in bones and teeth."

Canada lacks regulations on the many items brought into the country each year which may contain hazardous chemicals, she says.

Parent Denise Smith said she'd check out the Diego toys in her Toronto home to see if any are on the recall list.

The mother of two returned a Thomas the Tank Engine toy a couple of months ago over concerns it contained lead.

"I am disappointed that a manufacturer like Mattel (Fisher-Price's parent company) didn't look out for this," says Smith.

"More and more of us are turning to manufacturers of natural toys, organic and made in Canada," says Smith, adding beloved toys that are in close contact with children must be absolutely safe.

"Children are taking these toys to bed, taking them in the car with them. They are not putting them on a shelf."