

TRIBUNE INVESTIGATION | HIDDEN HAZARDS

Many more toys tainted with lead, inquiry finds

Tribune tests prompt stores to pull items from shelves



Tribune photo by Heather Stone

An analyst at a University of Iowa lab scrapes paint from a toy Godzilla. The paint had 4,500 parts per million of lead, more than seven times the federal and state legal limit. The toy's importer says the Godzilla toys it tested are safe.



800 toys tested—what we found

A yellow duck on a Baby Einstein Discover & Play Color Block contained 13,000 parts per million of lead, exceeding Illinois safety limits. A look at this and other products,

PAGE 16.

IN THE WEB EDITION

Watch lab technicians test toys for lead content at chicagotribune.com/lead. Read the Tribune's Hidden Hazards series and find tips about buying safe toys for children at chicagotribune.com/safety.

By Ted Gregory and Sam Roe
Tribune staff reporters

Many Chicago-area stores are routinely selling lead-tainted toys, including items with levels more than 10 times government safety limits, testing by the Tribune shows.

In one of the most comprehensive inquiries into lead in children's products, the Tribune tested about 800 toys and other items sold in shops, department stores, supermarkets, discount outlets and on the Internet.

Those tests found that a dozen items violated the federal safety limit. An additional nine exceeded much stricter state standards, including a popular Ty Girlz doll bought at a shop in Naperville as well as an award-winning Baby Einstein block purchased online.

The findings suggest that, despite a flurry of recalls and legislative attention, the problem of lead in toys may be more widespread than previously documented and that testing by manufacturers fails to protect consumers.

Retailers and manufacturers pulled the majority of the tainted products from shelves after being notified of the results by the Tribune. The Walgreens drugstore chain last month removed certain Christmas figurines from its 6,000 locations nationwide. Party City withdrew toy drums, novelty earrings and skull rings from its 500 stores. The Field Museum stopped selling some ceramic whistles and painted toy animals.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission said it believes the Tribune's testing of lead in toys is the largest undertaken outside the agency. The newspaper's study, which replicated the steps used by government regulators, also is among the most sophisticated efforts to check for lead in children's

INSIDE

What parents should know about lead.

PAGE 17

PLEASE SEE **HAZARDS**, PAGE 17

TRIBUNE INVESTIGATION | HIDDEN HAZARDS

HAZARDS:
'I don't know
what more we
could have done'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Asked about the findings, the spokeswoman for the safety commission Julie Vallesse, said it "always welcomes credible information to be reported to the agency so that we could follow up to determine if in fact toys, based on our own scientific testing, are in violation of the law."

A soft, dense metal, lead can accumulate in the body and cause learning and developmental delays in children. Lead-based paint in old homes remains the most common risk. But lead in children's products has been an increasing concern, with 29 recalls in October alone, the highest monthly total since the safety commission was founded in the 1970s.

Federal regulators stress that none of the recently recalled products has been linked to illnesses. In Chicago, lead prevention officials also say they have yet to trace a single poisoning case to a child ingesting lead in toys.

And the Tribune's testing turned up some encouraging results. When the newspaper checked the most heavily promoted Christmas toys at Wal-Mart and Toys "R" Us, it didn't find hazardous levels of lead in any of them—from a "Spider-Man 3" action figure to a Kid-Tough Digital Camera.

These tests of single items are no guarantee that entire lines of products are safe, given that even within the same factory, materials and standards can vary.

The testing did find lead-tainted toys throughout the Chicago area, from Long Grove to Hyde Park, from Downers Grove to the Massillonville. The vast majority were made in China.

The results countered a popular belief that upscale boutiques offer better protection from the hazard than chain retail outlets. More than one-third of the tainted items found by the Tribune were sold in small stores.

Above all, the testing underscores the perils facing parents as they try to make safe choices for their children.

Anxious buyers, anxious stores

The rising anxiety over lead-tainted toys played out a few weeks ago at Toys Et Cetera in Hyde Park, where a menacing-looking plastic Godzilla greeted shoppers.

Yellow paint on the 14-inch-tall monster showed a high lead content in a readout from a hand-held scanner operated by a Tribune reporter. A more scientific follow-up test at the University of Iowa Hygienic Laboratory found that the paint on the Godzilla's back contained 4,300 parts per million of lead, more than seven times the federal and state legal limit of 600 parts per million.

Nancy Stanek, owner of the four Toys Et Cetera shops in the Chicago area, didn't wait for the lab report. When the hand-held scanner showed the toy contained elevated levels of lead, she immediately pulled it and three copies off the floor of the Hyde Park store and ordered her other three stores to yank Godzilla too.

A veteran of 31 years in toy retailing, Stanek said the federal recalls and the Tribune's findings have left her concerned.

"It's just one more thing you've got to think about when you're out there looking for toys," Stanek said. "You're much more cognizant of country of origin, what companies are doing more testing, and whatnot."

Stanek noted that it would be impractical for her to hire a laboratory to test every item in her stores. She wants manufacturers, suppliers and the federal government to be more vigilant. While Washington has recently focused more on consumer safety, she says, for decades Congress and presidents from both parties have given the safety commission limited resources.

"On the one hand, we have anxious consumers; we have anxious retailers; we have anxious manufacturers," she said. "But we have a government that doesn't seem to be anywhere near as anxious as we are."

The distributor of the plastic Godzilla, the Toysmith Group, imports about 2,000 of the toys every year from China, said William Smith, president of the Auburn, Wash.-based company. After the Tribune notified the company of its lab results, Toysmith also tested its Godzillas. Those results from private labs showed lead levels well under the safety limit.

Toysmith attorney John Ryan disputed the Tribune's findings, adding that earlier tests the company performed on the toys also found that they were not tainted. "I don't know what more we could have done to be certain that we are only selling safe products," he said.

Given the nature of toy manufacturing, it's possible for two toys made by the same company to yield different lab results. In fact, when the Tribune scanned a bag of small plastic animal toys, some showed elevated levels of lead and others did not.

Toymakers often rely on a tangled web of lightly regulated contractors in China that may use different paints at different times. The Tribune found that sometimes lead levels varied in color to color even on an individual toy. Yellow and red, for instance, typically test higher than other colors because lead is a cheap, durable pigment for



A duck on the award-winning Baby Einstein Discover & Play Color Blocks contained 13,000 parts per million of lead, well over the state limit. Its distributor says its own tests show the blocks are safe.

Hundreds of items analyzed for lead content

It started at a Target in Villa Park and ended at a small toy store in Hyde Park. For two weeks this fall, a Tribune reporter used a hand-held scanner the Thermo Scientific Niton XRF Analyzer to check for lead in products children might handle.

He checked about 800 toys, clothes and other children's items on the shelves of more than 40 retailers. Another reporter bought items that looked as if they might contain lead.

The newspaper then sent items that indicated lead levels above the legal limit of 600 parts per million to the University of Iowa Hygienic Laboratory.

Clean scans

Using a hand-held scanner, the Tribune checked some toys expected to top holiday wish lists at Wal-Mart and Toys "R" Us. None seemed to pose a hazard. This does not guarantee that they are lead-free; different batches of the same toy can test differently depending on the material used. Here's a sampling of those toys, which were scanned once and came up as non-detect for lead.

- Kid Tough Digital Camera from Fisher-Price
- Air Hogs Havoc Heli by Spinmaster
- "Spider-Man 3" Movie Action Figure from Hasbro
- Little Mommy Real Loving Baby Doll from Mattel
- Littlest Pet Shop Paws Off Electronic Drive from Hasbro
- Laugh & Learn 2-in-1 Learning Kitchen from Fisher-Price
- Beginnings Teacakes Washable First Marks from Crayola
- GeoTrax Rail & Road System (Grand Central Station) from Fisher-Price
- LeapFrog See and Learn Alphabet Train from Kiddieland
- Too Cute Twins from You & Me
- Smart Cycle Physical Learning Ridecicle System from Fisher-Price
- Snuggly-Kins Sparkling Moves Nursery from Fisher-Price

those colors.

In all, the Tribune found 11 painted toys that exceeded lead safety limits.

Popular toys fail test

Baby Einstein markets its products as a way to give children a head start. Its Discover & Play Color Blocks, made with cloth and foam, have received an Oppenheim Toy Portfolio award and other honors.

But the Tribune testing found that one of the blocks could pose a hazard to children. A vinyl-like duck on the yellow block in the set contained 13,000 parts per million of lead. Under Illinois law, that amount is more than 20 times the legal safety limit.

Federal rules and guidelines are more complex.

While the U.S. bans toys containing lead paint, no federal law specifically covers lead in vinyl products. For vinyl, in which lead is sometimes used to enhance durability, the U.S. acts only if the lead content is high, the metal can leach out and regulators conclude that a child likely would handle the toy long enough to cause harm. Rarely has a vinyl product been recalled.

In Illinois, the law is much simpler: A toy is banned if it contains more than 600 parts per million of lead, regardless of what the product is made of or whether any lead likely to seep out. That makes the rules in Illinois, along with those in California, the strictest in the nation.

Analysts there chipped, scraped and immersed chunks of the products in acid to determine their lead content.

If products showed lead levels between 600 and 1,000 parts per million, the Tribune retested them and used the average. Those included the Jammin' Jenna doll and a painted cheetah figure.

For some items, that round of tests was followed by another at a Chicago lab that replicated digestion to learn whether lead could leach out when the item is swallowed. On vinyl products, this lab also performed "wipe tests," another procedure to determine if lead leaches out.

The Tribune found four vinyl-like products that contained lead exceeding the state limit, including the yellow Baby Einstein block. An additional test done for the Tribune showed that lead in the block's duck could seep out if ingested by a child. That would trigger further review of the product by the federal safety commission, based on its past practices.

Baby Einstein is a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Co., and the blocks' distributor, Kids II Inc., says Disney to use the Baby Einstein name. Kids II said it has tested the yellow blocks multiple times in recent years and has found no problems. The firm provided the Tribune one lab report, which the company said showed no hazard.

"We realize that the current attention to toy safety may require new discussions and perhaps new industry approaches to testing, quality control and manufacturing," said Jeff Cornelison, Kids II's senior vice president of sales and marketing. "Kids II will always remain part of those discussions to ensure that our industry continues to provide safe, quality products for children and their families."

A Disney spokesman said it requires companies using Disney-owned names to adhere to all government safety regulations.

The blocks the Tribune bought were not covered by the recall.

Banned in Illinois

Ty Inc. is best-known for its Beanie Babies. Another one of the Westmont-based company's popular products is its Ty Girlz line of dolls, including Jammin' Jenna. The Tribune found that the red vinyl shoes on three Jammin' Jenna dolls contained an average of 1,980 parts per million of lead.

Unlike the case of the Baby Einstein block, further testing showed none of the lead would leach out of the dolls. In the eyes of federal regulators, that would make the toys safe. But under Illinois law, the toy would be banned.

"Ty takes every precaution to ensure that our products are safe for children," said Scott Wehrs, Ty's chief operating officer. "We consider this our highest priority."

He provided the Tribune with two pages of a six-page lab report from June that he said showed Jammin' Jenna complies with federal safety standards. Wehrs also said the company retested the doll after the Tribune informed him of its results. That second test revealed no U.S. violations, Wehrs added, but he would not share the lab report.

Ty Inc. said the doll did not violate state rules because Illinois' lead law "makes only passing reference to lead in toys."

But Cara Smith, deputy chief of staff for Illinois Atty. Gen. Lisa Madigan,



A Tribune reporter tests a Godzilla toy at a shop in Hyde Park.

What should
parents know
about lead?**Q: Why is lead dangerous?**

A: Elevated levels of lead can cause neurological damage, delayed mental and physical development, attention and learning deficiencies, and hearing problems. Those adverse effects, which can be long-lasting or permanent, frequently occur through an accumulation of lead in the body over years.

Q: How much lead is legal?

A: Illinois law bans all toys or other children's products that have a lead content greater than 600 parts per million. Federal law bans paint and other surface coatings containing lead in that amount. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a far stricter limit of 40 ppb.

Q: How can parents tell if a child may have excessive lead levels in the bloodstream?

A: The academy has developed a checklist to determine whether a child should be screened for lead, including whether your child lives or spends a great deal of time in a house built before 1978 (the year lead paint was banned for residential use) and remodeled in the last six months; or one that is within one block of a major highway or busy street. A blood test is the only definitive way to determine lead level.

Q: How do you check toys for lead?

A: Hand-held scanners are available for rent from companies, but they are expensive. The only way to determine precise lead content in a product is to send the item to a lab. A list of labs accredited by the federal Environmental Protection Agency is at www.epa.gov/lead/pubs/nlpllist.pdf. Testing toys can cost \$5 to \$35 per sample, and it often damages or destroys the item.

Q: Do pencils contain lead?

A: No, pencils and the paint on their exterior are generally lead-free.

Q: What is the most common source of lead contamination?

The American Academy of Pediatrics says lead paint in the home is most often the culprit in the elevated blood levels of children.

made of and whether the lead could leach out.

Holiday items yanked

Every fall, millions of holiday knick-knacks flood stores. Even before the Halloween buckets, masks and decorations come down, Christmas ornaments, figurines and stocking stuffers go up.

In the Tribune testing, Illinois items accounted for a large percentage of the products showing high lead levels.

"The seasonal products category has really been overlooked," said Jeff Weidenhamer, a chemist at Ashland University in Ohio whose testing has prompted recalls of Halloween items. Testing by the Tribune found holiday items with high amounts of lead, including a Christmas figurine sold at Walgreens, the nation's largest drugstore chain. The red paint on the figurine's snout (a Penguin on a seaweed—tested at 4,500 parts per million of lead, more than eight times the legal limit).

When the Tribune notified the Deerfield-based company the chain pulled the item nationwide.

Company spokeswoman Carol Hively said Walgreens believes the item is not technically a toy and therefore not subject to lead safety rules. But, she said, "a child might think they kind of look like a toy or for the holidays they might be displayed in the reach of a child, so ... we pulled them."

ALEX attorney Rick Locker criticized the Iowa lab the Tribune used for its initial test, saying one of its methods potential exposure from repeated handling of the toy, found that no lead would escape under those conditions. A third round of testing, however, showed that lead could leach from the toy's cover if a piece were ingested.

ALEX attorney Rick Locker criticized the Iowa lab the Tribune used for its initial test, saying one of its methods potential exposure from repeated handling of the toy, found that no lead would escape under those conditions. A third round of testing, however, showed that lead could leach from the toy's cover if a piece were ingested.

The federal safety commission generally views Halloween items as children's products, but Christmas figurines fall into a gray area.

In recent weeks, the agency has announced the recall of several Halloween products for high levels of lead, including fake teeth and a Frankenstein cup, both of which were brought to regulators' attention by Weidenhamer.

All of the tainted holiday items the Tribune found were manufactured in China, including two Halloween necklaces. The importer of the necklaces, Mark Dillon, owner of Dillon Importing of Oklahoma City said he would no longer sell those items.

Dillon said he frequently travels to trade shows in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong to buy seasonal items from middlemen. Often he is unsure who makes the toys, which he said is common in his business.

He said he has considered hiring a U.S. lab to test his products. In the past, importers have put their trust in lab reports provided by foreign manufacturers.

"But whether that is falsified," Dillon said, "you never know."

Tribune staff reporter Maurice Possley contributed to this report. tpgorey@tribune.com sroe@tribune.com

TRIBUNE INVESTIGATION | HIDDEN HAZARDS

Tainted toys: The lab results

The Tribune tested about 800 toys and children's products for lead; 21 exceeded the Illinois safety limit, the federal standard or both. When informed of the results — based on lab tests of a single version of each toy — stores and manufacturers responded in a variety of ways.

(Responses in italics)

KEY TO LEAD CONTENT

The lead content of each item is represented as the number of times the legal limit (number in parentheses is parts per million of lead)

Legal limit
(600 parts per million)

FAILED state and federal standards

Test results indicated 12 items had an amount of lead exceeding state and federal standards.

FAILED state standards only

9 items failed to meet state standards but do not violate U.S. limits. The reason: Either secondary tests showed only small amounts of lead would escape if swallowed or federal rules do not apply to certain materials, such as vinyl.

PAINTED ITEMS
Illinois and federal laws ban toys containing paint with more than 600 parts per million of lead.

<p>142 times the legal limit (85,000 ppm)</p> <p>Wooden butterfly From: Pumpkin Moon, Oak Park <i>(Said it had no more in stock)</i> Made: <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown</p>	<p>55 times (33,000 ppm)</p> <p>'Super Hero' Superman From: El Dollar, Chicago (Pilsen) <i>(Pulled from shelves; would not provide distributor name)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In China</p>	<p>45 times (27,000 ppm)</p> <p>Red painted drumstick From: Party City, Berwyn <i>(Pulled from shelves nationwide)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In China; distributed by Rubie's Costume Co. <i>(Pulled from shelves nationwide)</i></p>	<p>15 times (8,800 ppm)</p> <p>Small yellow car From: El Dollar, Chicago (Pilsen) <i>(Pulled from shelves; would not provide distributor name)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In China</p>	<p>14 times (8,200 ppm)</p> <p>Martial arts figurine From: World Treasures Emporium, Chicago (Chinatown) <i>(Pulled from shelves)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In China</p>
---	---	---	---	--

<p>12 times (7,300 ppm)</p> <p>Halloween figurine From: Walgreens, Chicago <i>(Pulled from shelves nationwide)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In China; distributed by East West Distributing, owned by Walgreens</p>	<p>12 times (7,000 ppm)</p> <p>Painted toy animal From: Field Museum, Chicago <i>(Pulled from shelves but declined to disclose where purchased)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In Mexico</p>	<p>8 times (4,900 ppm)</p> <p>Christmas figurine From: Walgreens, Chicago <i>(Pulled from shelves nationwide)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In China; distributed by East West Distributing, owned by Walgreens</p>	<p>8 times (4,500 ppm)</p> <p>Godzilla From: Toys Et Cetera, Chicago (Hyde Park) <i>(Pulled from shelves)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In China; distributed by the Toysmith Group <i>(Provided lab reports stating lead levels are under safety limits)</i></p>	<p>6 times (3,400 ppm)</p> <p>'Hospital Honey' earrings From: Party City, Berwyn <i>(Pulled from shelves nationwide)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In China; distributed by Rubie's Costume Co. <i>(Pulled from shelves nationwide)</i></p>	<p>1.1 times (670 ppm)</p> <p>'Wild Animal' cheetah From: El Dollar, Chicago (Pilsen) <i>(Pulled from shelves; would not provide distributor name)</i> Made: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In China; manufacturer could not be traced</p>
--	---	---	---	---	---

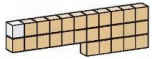
VINYL AND OTHER ITEMS

Illinois bans all toys and other items used by children if the articles contain more than 600 parts per million of lead, including vinyl products.

There is no federal law specifically covering lead in vinyl toys.

The U.S. government acts only if the lead content is high, the metal can leach out if the products were chewed or swallowed, and regulators conclude that a child would likely handle the items long enough to cause harm.

27 times
(16,000 ppm)



OgoSport inflatable yellow disk

From: C. Foster Toys, Hinsdale
(No response from C. Foster Toys corporate headquarters)

Made: In China for OgoSport
(Provided a 2006 lab report stating item meets federal safety standards)

22 times
(13,000 ppm)



Baby Einstein Discover & Play Color Block (yellow)

From: babyclassroom.com
(Referred questions to manufacturer)

Made: In China for Kids II Inc.
(Said its own lab tests show the toy meets safety standards)

5 times
(2,800 ppm)



Desk To Go writing mat and case

From: My Favorite Toy Store, Downers Grove
(Pulled from shelves)

Made: In China for ALEX
(Provided lab test stating lead content was under safety limits)

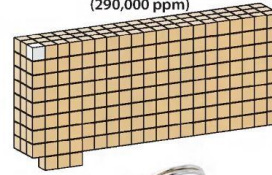
METAL ITEMS

Illinois bans metal toys and children's jewelry containing more than 600 parts per million of lead.

There is no U.S. law specifically covering lead in metal toys and children's jewelry.

But regulators have an "enforcement policy" and have recalled such items if they fail tests measuring total lead content and exceed allowable amounts that would seep out if the products were swallowed.

483 times
(290,000 ppm)

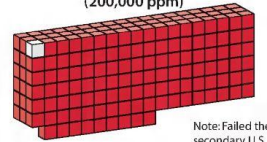


Heart-shaped ornament

Purchased from: A boutique in Long Grove (No comment)

Made: Unknown; manufactured by Ganz
(Said item is not children's jewelry and therefore not subject to lead safety rules)

333 times
(200,000 ppm)



Note: Failed the secondary U.S. guideline.

Pirate skull ring

From: Party City, Berwyn
(Pulled from shelves nationwide)

Made: In China; distributed by Rubie's Costume Co.
(Pulled from shelves nationwide)

3 times
(1,980 ppm)



Ty Girlz Jammin' Jenna doll

From: Learning Express, Naperville
(Pulled from shelves)

Made: In China for Ty Inc.
(Provided a lab report that the firm says shows the doll meets federal lead standards)

3 times
(1,700 ppm)



Ceramic whistle

From: Field Museum, Chicago
(Pulled from shelves)

Made: In Peru; imported by Inter-American Trading
(Company said item is made by Peruvian artists, whom the firm would contact)

1.4 times
(810 ppm)

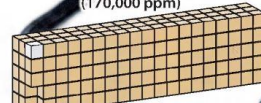


Tennis ball

From: Dollar Mart Plus, Chicago (Pilsen)
(Manager said he called distributor, who is testing the product)

Made: In China; store owner declined to name distributor or manufacturer

283 times
(170,000 ppm)

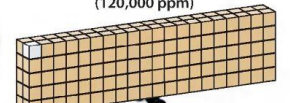


Skull necklace

From: Pumpkin Moon, Oak Park
(Pulled from shelves)

Made: In China; imported by Dillon Importing
(Said it would stop selling the item and did not know the manufacturer)

200 times
(120,000 ppm)



Coffin necklace

From: Pumpkin Moon, Oak Park
(Pulled from shelves)

Made: In China; imported by Dillon Importing
(Said it would stop selling the item and did not know the manufacturer)