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LOS ANGELES: Federal and state watchdogs opened a new front Monday in the campaign to keep poisons out of Chinese imports, warning Asian manufacturers not to substitute other toxins for lead in children's jewelry and beginning an inquiry into cadmium found in the products around the United States.

Regulators reacted swiftly to an Associated Press investigation reporting that some Chinese manufacturers have been using cadmium in place of lead in children's charm bracelets and pendants, sometimes at extraordinarily high levels.

Congress clamped down on lead in those products in 2008, but cadmium is even more harmful.

"Parents will be outraged to learn certain jewelry makers overseas thought they could pull a fast one at the expense of our kids' safety," said Democratic Sen. Mark Pryor of Arkansas, who has championed stronger rules for children's products.

Cadmium, which is known to cause cancer, is a soft, whitish metal that occurs naturally in soil.

It's perhaps best known as half of rechargeable nickel-cadmium batteries, but also is used in pigments, electroplating and plastic.

Cadmium is attractive to Chinese manufacturers because it is cheap and easy to work with.

But, like lead, it can hinder brain development in the very young, recent research shows.

In taped remarks to be delivered Tuesday in Hong Kong, the chairwoman of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission urged other countries to ensure that manufacturers do not substitute cadmium, antimony or barium in place of lead in children's products.

"All of us should be committed to keeping hazardous or toxic levels of heavy metals out of ... toys and children's products," Inez Tenenbaum said in a transcript of remarks to an international toy safety conference.

Tenenbaum singled out cadmium for special vigilance and said: "Voluntary efforts will only take us so far."

The commission immediately said it was opening an investigation into the AP's findings, promising to "take action as quickly as possible to protect the safety of children."

Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal also said Monday that his office would investigate cadmium content in some products, particularly costume jewelry.

Blumenthal would not say whether he's investigating particular merchants.

Rather than "singling out any stores, we're interested in any retail outlets that sell jewelry that may have cadmium," he said.

The AP ran lab tests on 103 pieces of low-price children's jewelry such as charm bracelets and pendants purchased around the country. Virtually all imported were from China.

Twelve items had cadmium levels of at least 10 percent by weight.

One piece had a startling 91 percent, and others contained more than 80 percent.

The government has no restrictions on cadmium in jewelry.

Children can be exposed by sucking or biting such jewelry.

But without direct exposure, most people do not experience its worst effects: cancer, kidneys that leak vital protein and bones that spontaneously snap.

The worrisome results came in tests of bracelet charms sold at Walmart, at the jewelry chain Claire's and at a Dollar N More store.

High amounts of cadmium also were detected in "The Princess and The Frog" movie-themed pendants.

Eighty-nine items were free of cadmium.

U.S.-based trade groups, as well as distributors and sellers of the jewelry containing cadmium, said their products meet safety standards.

Cadmium is regulated in

painted toys but not in jewelry.

A cadmium specialist with the Beijing office of Asian Metal Ltd., a market research and consultancy firm, said products with cadmium are normally directed to the Chinese domestic market.

A 2008 law imposed limits on lead in children's products and sent factories rushing for substitutes.

About the same time, cadmium prices dropped, in part because nickel-cadmium batteries are swiftly being replaced with newer designs.

In her speech, Tenenbaum praised manufacturers for largely abandoning lead in their goods.

The tests run for the AP found little lead.

The jewelry testing was conducted by chemistry professor Jeff Weidenhamer of Ashland University in Ohio, who over the past few years has provided the government with results showing high lead content in products that were later recalled.

His testing of children's jewelry for AP also showed that some items easily shed cadmium, elevating concerns about exposure to children.

"Clearly it seems like for a metal as toxic as cadmium, somebody ought to be watching out to make sure there aren't high levels in items that could end up in the hands of kids," Weidenhamer said.

"There's nothing positive that you can say about this metal. It's a poison," said Bruce A. Fowler, a cadmium specialist and toxicologist with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

On the agency's priority list of 275 most hazardous substances in the environment, cadmium ranks No. 7.

If the cadmium-laden jewelry were industrial garbage, it could qualify as hazardous waste.

But since there are no cadmium restrictions on jewelry, such items are sold legally.

The federal government has never recalled an item for cadmium, though it has fielded scattered complaints for at least two years.

The CPSC cited "an upward trend" in reports of products containing cadmium.

Private-sector testing confirms this.

Two laboratories that analyze more than a thousand children's products each year checked their data at AP's request.

Both said their findings of cadmium above 300 parts per million in an item - the current federal limit for lead - increased from about 0.5 percent of tests in 2007 to about 2.2 percent of tests in 2009.

However, Sheila A. Millar, a lawyer for the Fashion Jewelry Trade Association, said members had not noticed "widespread substitution" with cadmium.

She said jewelry makers these days often opt for zinc, which is a safer substitute.

- AP

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