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China balks at lead limits on kids' jewelry

By Jayne O'Donnell, USA TODAY

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The Chinese government opposes a proposed U.S. standard limiting the amount of lead allowed in bracelets, necklaces and other jewelry sold for children.

All but three of more than 30 Consumer Product Safety Commission recalls for lead in children's jewelry since 2003 were for China-made items. The others were made in India.

The Chinese government said in comments to the CPSC that it's not necessary to limit the lead content to the proposed 0.06% by weight because much of the lead wouldn't seep out of jewelry so would "do little harm for children." China's comments are the only ones opposing the CPSC proposal. A final regulation is likely by early 2008.

CPSC says 20,000 children were treated in emergency rooms from 2000 to 2005 after swallowing jewelry. The number doesn't include choking incidents. A 4-year-old boy died last year after swallowing a charm that was 99% lead.

CPSC is concerned that children can ingest unsafe levels of lead after putting necklaces and other jewelry in their mouths, even briefly. If they are also exposed to lead in their homes or drinking water, there can be a cumulative risk. Lead poisoning can lower the IQ, cause learning disabilities and lead to kidney or liver disease.

Along with being the target of nearly all of the lead jewelry recalls, China-made products have made up half of CPSC's overall recalls for at least two years, says acting Chairman Nancy Nord. Recalls of China-made products have been steadily increasing since 2003.

"It is absolutely imperative that all manufacturers understand that if they are going to sell products in the U.S., consumer protection has to be one of their main concerns," she says.

In the comments, Guo LiSheng, a deputy director general in China's Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine, said the agency agrees with the U.S. that children's health and safety need to be protected but believes putting warning labels on the jewelry "may be more efficient than setting the limit of lead content."

The Toy Industry Association, some of whose member companies make jewelry included in toy and craft kits, supports the proposed rule, says Rick Locker, an attorney for the group.

He says it should "help level the playing field in the toy industry," because although lead paint for houses and children's products is banned, there are no rules about lead content in children's jewelry. There are only guidelines that the disparate novelty industry may not be familiar with.

Nord urges parents to check if their children's jewelry has been recalled at cpsc.gov.