

Lead tests raise red flag for lipsticks Hazardous levels found in one-third of market samples

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By John C. Drake, Globe Staff | October 11, 2007

Parents worried about the dangers of lead in their children's toys, bibs, and homes are about to be confronted with a new potential hazard: their lipstick.

The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics is releasing today product test results that found that more than half of 33 brand-name lipsticks tested contained lead. The lead levels in one-third of the lipstick samples, purchased from retailers in four cities, including Boston, exceeded 0.1 parts per million, which is the federal lead limit for candy.

The lead levels varied independently of the lipstick's cost, according to the coalition of public health and consumer rights' groups.

"There are hazardous levels of lead in lipstick," said Stacy Malkan, a cofounder of the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics. "These tests are a wake-up call to the industry."

The lead levels should not concern healthy women without children in their homes, said Joel Tickner, a professor of environmental health at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. But use of lead-tainted lipstick by pregnant women could lead to lead exposure for the fetus, and lead exposure for children who use lipstick is also a concern, he said.

"These levels of lead are not likely to cause poisoning," said Tickner, a specialist on exposure to toxic chemicals. "They are likely to be cumulative to other exposures and can cause subtle neurological effects you can't trace back to a single exposure."

The testing, conducted by Bodycote Testing Group laboratory in Santa Fe Springs, Calif., found the highest levels of lead in several samples of L'Oreal and Cover Girl cosmetics. L'Oreal Colour Riche "True Red" lipstick had a lead content of 0.65 parts per million, and a sample of the makeup giant's "Classic Wine" color had a lead content of 0.58 parts per million.

Cover Girl's Incredifull Lipcolor "Maximum Red" and ContinuousColor "CherryBrandy" had lead contents of 0.56 and 0.28 parts per million, respectively. In a statement, L'Oreal said it "proudly stands behind" its products.

"Each and every ingredient used in our products has been thoroughly reviewed and tested by our internal safety team made up of toxicologists, clinicians, pharmacists, and physicians," the statement read. "All the brands of the L'Oreal Group are in full compliance with FDA regulations . . . and the requirements for safety in the more than 130 countries in which our products are sold."

The findings follow numerous recent nationwide recalls of children's toys and jewelry found to have excessive levels of lead. "There seems to be an almost endless list of products that infant children and pregnant women are exposed to that put them at risk for lead poisoning," said Dr. Sean Palfrey, a pediatrician at Boston Medical Center and medical director of the Boston Lead Poisoning Prevention Program.

"If you have a mom who uses a lipstick which has some lead in it and then she gets pregnant, she may be slightly poisoned and can poison her fetus," he said. "Then the baby is born and may have an elevated lead level, which is dangerous."

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says there is no safe level of lead exposure for children and has called for eliminating lead hazards in children's environments. But the federal government has not cautioned about lead content in lipstick.

Malkan said that lead in lipstick is a valid concern, borne out by the campaign's tests. But she dismissed the cancer scare and a suggestion that consumers can test for lead by scratching lipstick with a gold ring.

The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics is calling on manufacturers to reformulate their products to remove lead

and is calling on the Food and Drug Administration to more closely regulate the content of cosmetics.

But she cautioned that these tests should not be taken as "the definitive word" on lead in lipstick. "It's a tiny percentage of the market in lipstick," she said. "Our test identified a problem in the industry. There's lead in lipstick that doesn't need to be there and shouldn't be there."

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