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HOLIDAY SHOPPERS BE WISE!

Avoid toys containing lead paint. Buy age-appropriate, safe, and asthma-friendly toys.

The Westchester County Department of Health is reminding holiday shoppers to be aware of health and safety concerns when purchasing toys for children this year. Several concerns are being highlighted, including the risks associated with lead in some toys and the increased exposure to allergy-causing substances in some plush toys that can result in asthma symptoms.

Asthma

“In Westchester, about 12,000 children have asthma and the number of cases has been increasing over the past two decades,” said Joshua Lipsman, M.D., J.D., M.P.H., Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. “It is a serious condition that can cause death if not properly managed. One essential element of asthma management is avoidance of allergens – substances that bring on an asthma attack – such as dust.”

As every parent of young children knows, stuffed animals and other plush toys act like magnets for dust. Unfortunately, these are also the toys that children often take to bed with them. As well as increasing the risk of an asthma attack in children with asthma, breathing dust from plush toys all night long can also increase the risk of respiratory irritation in otherwise healthy children.

To address this issue, the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA) has launched a new program to test and label toys that are "asthma friendly." The Westchester County Health Department is encouraging parents to look for the AAFA “Certified Asthma Friendly” label when buying plush toys. A picture of the label and more information on choosing allergy-free toys can be found on the AAFA website at

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<http://www.aafa.org/>. The Health Department is also advising parents to wash plush toys frequently and discourage children from sleeping with more than one plush toy.

Lead

Lead poisoning is another health issue that continues to be a concern in Westchester. Exposure to lead can cause anemia, and excessive ongoing exposure can interfere with brain functioning, leading to learning difficulties and even irreversible brain damage.

“Unfortunately, some toy manufacturers, particularly in other countries, continue to produce toys containing lead paint,” said Dr. Lipsman. “When these products are discovered in Westchester, we immediately warn the public through recall notices on the Health Department website,” he said.

Children’s jewelry and die-cast cars are two of the items most commonly found to contain lead paint. The Westchester County Health Department recommends that gift-givers check the recall notices at <http://www.westchestergov.com/health/lead.htm>, and only buy toys from reputable manufacturers.

Choking

The Health Department is also warning residents that small toys, or those with removable parts, can pose a choking hazard to children under age three. Use a paper towel tube to measure the size of the toy or part. If it fits entirely in the tube, it is a choking hazard. Toys with small non-removable parts may still be a choking hazard if those parts can be broken off.

Each year in the United States, injuries from toys send more than 200,000 children under age 14 to hospital emergency rooms. Last year, 20 children died from toy-related injuries. Nine of those were choking deaths. Federal law requires manufacturers to place warning labels on toys that pose a choking hazard to young children. However, many toy-related injuries occur when parents overestimate their child’s ability to handle a toy designed for older children, or when a younger child gets hold of an older sibling’s toys.

“Children under age three are especially vulnerable since they tend to put things into their mouths that could choke or poison them.” said Dr. Lipsman. “Parents should never assume that their child knows better than to do that, and should make sure that children under three cannot get access to toys belonging to older siblings if these would be hazardous to the younger child,” he said.

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General Toy Safety

The Health Department also is offering the following additional tips for toy safety this holiday season:

- Children under three should not play with latex balloons or pieces of burst balloons.
- Avoid toys with sharp points or edges.
- Immediately discard plastic wrappings on toys before they become a hazard for children.
- Toys that produce loud noises can cause damage to a child's hearing.
- Propelled toys and projectiles can cause cuts or serious eye injuries.
- Toys with strings, straps or cords longer than four inches could wrap around a child's neck causing strangulation.
- Be a label reader and use the age and safety recommendations as a guide to selecting toys. If you are tempted to buy a child a toy labeled for an older child, you should reconsider. Age labels are there for safety purposes, not as a gauge of the child's development.
- Be certain to keep toys appropriate for older children away from younger children.
- Electrical toys are a potential burn hazard. Avoid toys with any heating elements, such as batteries or electrical plugs for children under eight.
- Magnetic toys are a less well known danger. If two or more magnetized pieces are swallowed, they can become attached causing intestinal damage or blocking.
- A helmet is a necessity, not an accessory, for all wheeled toys. It would be wise to include a helmet with the gift. Elbow pads and knee pads are also very important for safety when using skates, scooters or skateboards. Be certain that helmets and safety gear are sized to fit. Reflective clothing, stickers or bike and scooter reflectors are important if the child will be riding in reduced light conditions.

For advice on safe and age-appropriate toys for your child, visit the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission website at www.cpsc.gov/.

For more information, please call the Westchester County Health Department at (914) 813-5000, or visit the Health Department web site at www.westchestgov.com/health.