



Pretty but Poisonous: Lead in Handbags and Wallets



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Introduction

Faux leather handbags and wallets are used by women and teens every day. Bright colors and fashionable styles make them popular items. Most of these women and teens would be surprised, even appalled, to discover that their bags and wallets contain lead. Yet, it's true. This report describes lead-containing wallets and handbags found by the Center for Environmental Health at major retailers during the last month.

Lead is a stunningly toxic metal. A long list of problems has been linked to lead exposure: lowered intelligence, behavior problems, cancer, strokes, high blood pressure, kidney problems, anemia, cavities, and delayed puberty.

It is well known that children are particularly susceptible to the effects of lead, but lead's effects on adults are also of concern. It's especially alarming that exposure to lead during pregnancy can reduce the later intellectual development of a woman's unborn child.

What We Did

We purchased faux leather wallets and handbags at major California retailers in March and April of 2009. We screened them for lead using an x-ray fluorescence analyzer. We tested the outer surface of the faux leather material, the part of the wallet or handbag that is touched when the item is handled.

Lead-containing Wallets and Handbags

Examples of wallets and handbags containing lead at levels that exceed the federal standard for lead in paint.

Brand		Store
Aldo		Aldo
Apt. 9		Kohl's
Ashley Stewart		Ashley Stewart
Bakers		Bakers

Chinese Laundry		Macy's
Cul-de-sac		Sears
Daisy Fuentes		Kohls
Dana Buchman		Kohls
Forever 21		Forever 21

Liz & Co.		JC Penney
Lulu NYC		Kohls
New York & Company		New York & Company
Nine & Co.		Kohls
No Boundaries		Wal-Mart

Relic		Kohls
Rosetti		JC Penney
Roxy		Ross
Steve Madden		Macys
St John's Bay		JC Penney

Urban Expressions	 A bright orange, structured handbag with a top handle and a small shoulder strap. It has a rounded bottom and a flap closure.	DSW
Worthington	 A yellow, multi-pocketed handbag with a top handle and a shoulder strap. It features several pockets and a buckle detail.	JC Penney
Xhilaration	 A bright yellow, structured handbag with a top handle and a shoulder strap. It has a large front flap with a silver buckle.	Target
Xhilaration	 A bright blue, structured handbag with a top handle and a shoulder strap. It has a large front flap with a silver buckle.	Target
5-7-9	 A yellow, structured handbag with a top handle and a shoulder strap. It has a large front flap with a silver buckle.	5-7-9

Not Good for Pregnant Women or their Babies

Two recent studies highlight the impacts that lead exposure during pregnancy can have on a women's unborn child.

Both of the studies were published in the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences's journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

The first study looked at IQ scores of children ages 6 to 10 in relationship to their mother's blood lead levels during pregnancy. The researchers concluded that "Lead exposure around 28 weeks gestation is a critical period for later child intellectual development, with lasting and possibly permanent effects. There was no evidence of a threshold; the strongest lead effects on IQ occurred within the first few micrograms of BPb [blood lead level]."

The second study looked at mental development of two-year-olds, again in relationship to lead exposure of their mothers during pregnancy. The researchers found that lead exposure during the first trimester (three month period), when some women are not even aware that they are pregnant, had the most pronounced effects.

Lead also reduces a woman's ability to become pregnant. Two recent studies, one from the Taiwan Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and the other from Brown Medical School, showed that women with higher lead exposures were more likely to have infertility problems.

Because of these kinds of problems, the state of California has identified lead as a chemical that causes developmental toxicity.

Not Good for Other Adults Either

Lead also causes a wide spectrum of health problems in adults.

One significant disease caused by lead exposure is cancer. The International Agency for Research on Cancer, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Toxicology Program, have all identified lead as a cancer causing chemical.

Lead also can reduce what researchers call cognitive function in adults. This is a term used to describe our ability to complete mental tasks like recalling something you heard recently or putting a list in alphabetical order. Public health researchers recently found that lifetime lead exposure, particularly exposure as young women, was linked with reduced cognitive function when these women reached their 50s and 60s.

Other important diseases are also linked to lead exposure. Researchers from Tulane University and Johns Hopkins University recently showed that low level lead exposures are linked to a greater risk of heart attacks and strokes. Other recent studies showed that lead exposure increases blood pressure problems, accelerates kidney failure in patients with chronic kidney disease and is linked to an increased risk of Lou Gehrig's disease.

What You Can Do

During the past decade, the Center for Environmental Health has successfully negotiated agreements with manufacturers of other products that contain toxic chemicals. These agreements reduced the amount of toxic chemicals in children's medicines, wood play equipment, lunchboxes, jewelry, and candy. We used California's Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986, commonly known as Proposition 65, to initiate these actions. We are taking the same action with the wallets and handbags with lead hazards.

While our legal action is pending here are some steps you can take to avoid lead in handbags and wallets:

- If you're purchasing a wallet or handbag buy one that is made of natural materials rather than faux leather.
- If you already own a faux leather handbag we recommend that you make sure that children don't play with it. We also recommend that you wash your hands after touching it.
- Ask your favorite accessory store to carry lead-free products.

References

Introduction

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Not Good For Pregnant Women

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