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New Testing Reveals Hidden Dangerous Chemicals in Popular Halloween Costumes and “Trick or Treat” Bags

Study Finds Costumes and Party Supplies Sold by Top Retailers Contain Hazardous Additives in Costumes and Accessories

(Pittsburgh, PA) -- A study released today by the Ecology Center’s HealthyStuff.org project has found elevated levels of toxic chemicals in popular Halloween costumes, accessories and party supplies. The nonprofit Ecology Center tested 105 types of Halloween gear for substances linked to asthma, birth defects, learning disabilities, reproductive problems, liver toxicity and cancer. The products were purchased from top national retailers including CVS, Kroger, Party City, Target, Walmart, and Walgreens.

“We found that seasonal products, like thousands of other products we have tested, are full of dangerous chemicals,” said Jeff Gearhart, HealthyStuff.org research director. “Poorly regulated toxic chemicals consistently show up in seasonal products. Hazardous chemicals in consumer products pose unnecessary and avoidable health hazards to children, consumers, communities, workers and our environment.”

“Women for a Healthy Environment is pleased to work with coalition members such as the team at Healthy Stuff who conducted this product testing. The results are yet another example that laws that guide chemicals used in thousands of everyday consumer products are terribly broken,” said Michelle Naccarati-Chapkis, executive director of Pittsburgh-based Women for a Healthy Environment, “As a mother, I’m terribly concerned about the harmful chemicals contained in products geared toward our children. Unfortunately, there are more tricks than treats this Halloween season.”

HealthyStuff.org tested Halloween products for chemicals based on their toxicity or tendency to build up in people and the environment. These chemicals include lead, bromine (brominated flame retardants), chlorine (vinyl/PVC plastic), phthalates, arsenic, and tin (organotins).

Some products contained multiple chemical hazards, including a Toddler Batman Costume whose belt contained 29% regulated phthalates, 340ppm tin, and lead in the lining of the mask at 120 ppm. Overall, 39% of the products contained tin at levels suggesting organotin stabilizers, which are endocrine disruptors and can damage the developing brain and immune system.

Exposure to toxic chemicals is cumulative and comes from many sources, including diet, air, dust and direct contact with products. Moreover, chemicals being released from products throughout their life cycle are increasingly being recognized as important sources of exposure. In conjunction with the release,

advocates with the Mind the Store campaign launched a new national online petition to major retailers calling on them to eliminate these hazardous chemicals in consumer products such as Halloween costumes and accessories.

“Our nation’s biggest retailers have a responsibility to their customers to sell safe products, especially when it comes to our children,” said Mike Schade, Mind the Store Campaign Director for Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families. “Their considerable market share gives them the power and the responsibility to demand safer chemicals and products from their suppliers. This new testing underscores the need for big retailers to ensure products on their shelves, such as Halloween costumes, don’t contain chemical hazards.”

The Mind the Store Campaign, coordinated by Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families, is challenging the nation’s top ten US retailers to get tough on toxic chemicals. Chemicals highlighted in the new HealthyStuff.org Halloween study are on the Hazardous 100+ list of dangerous chemicals, which advocates have been calling for retailers to disclose, eliminate, and safely substitute. Over the past year, both Walmart and Target have made strides in launching new initiatives to disclose and limit the use of certain toxic chemicals.

The results of this study are available on the easy-to-use consumer website – www.HealthyStuff.org and build on recent HealthyStuff studies on back-to-school products, summer seasonal & beach products and university-themed products. The majority of these seasonal or specialty products routinely contain one or more toxic chemicals. Due to the fact that many consumer products are largely unregulated, the items tested sometimes have levels of toxic chemicals that exceed the regulated levels set for children’s products and toys.

In addition to finding many products with chemical hazards, HealthyStuff.org test data shows that many Halloween products do not contain dangerous substances, proving that safer products can be made. For example, the results show shifts in some products away from hazardous phthalate plasticizers to less hazardous non-phthalate plasticizers. This represents a market shift in the face of growing consumer and regulatory pressure.

Highlights of Findings from HealthyStuff.org’s Halloween Product Study:

Thirty-three of the 105 tested Halloween products contained polyvinyl chloride (vinyl or PVC) components.

Seventeen of the vinyl products were tested for phthalate plasticizers. Of these, two items contained phthalates that were recently banned by the Consumer Product Safety Commission in children’s products. One product was a Disney Wall Art (vinyl wall stickers) set which contained 16% regulated phthalates. Another product was a Toddler Batman Muscle Costume purchased at Walmart. In the costume’s yellow belt, HealthyStuff.org measured 29% regulated phthalates (290,000 ppm) and 340 ppm tin. Lead was detected in the mask inner lining at 120 ppm. Overall, five percent of all products were measured to have lead exceeding 100 ppm.

The study also documented an ongoing shift away from phthalate plasticizers in flexible vinyl products. Tests showed that fifteen of the vinyl items tested were plasticized with the less toxic chemical DOTP.

Ten percent of the products contained levels of bromine consistent with brominated flame retardants. Two Disney-themed Trick-or-Treat bags purchased at Kroger, for example, contained 28,000

ppm and 6,000 ppm bromine, respectively. Halloween light sets purchased at Walgreen's and CVS contained similarly high amounts of bromine.

Many of the products with brominated flame retardants also contained high levels of antimony, suggesting an antimony-based flame retardant was used in addition to the brominated chemicals.

Thirty-nine percent of the products, ranging from dress-up shoes to a skeleton "light stick," contained tin at levels suggesting organotin stabilizers. Vinyl products were twice as likely to contain tin as non-vinyl materials. Some forms of organotins are endocrine disruptors; other forms can impact the developing brain and damage the immune system.

To analyze the Halloween products, researchers used a High Definition X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) analyzer, Infrared Spectroscopy and laboratory testing. XRF is an accurate device that has been used by the Environmental Protection Agency to screen packaging, the Food & Drug Administration to screen food, and many State and County Health Departments to screen for residential lead paint. Additional samples were analyzed by laboratories using EPA test methods.

Complete product sample data, photos of products tested, and more information about what consumers can do is available now at www.HealthyStuff.org.

Non-Toxic Halloween Tips

1. Contact your favorite retailers and ask them to sell non-toxic supplies.
2. Avoid vinyl products: select cloth and natural materials for costumes and decorations.
3. Make up and masks: Use paint and pencils made from clay or other natural ingredients, our make you own.
4. Trick or Treating: use old pillow cases or reusable shopping bags.
5. Pumpkins: Roast and eat the seeds and compost the pumpkin when you're done.
6. Decorations: Avoid plastics and instead use paper, cardboard, leaves or other natural and recyclable materials for your decorations.

More detailed tips available at HealthyStuff.org.

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About Women for a Healthy Environment

Women for a Healthy Environment educates and empowers the public on issues associated with environmental exposures that impact human health, including toxic chemicals in consumer products. The organization advocates for policy solutions that better protect human health and the environment and provides programming that focuses on creating Healthy Homes, Healthy Schools and Healthy Workplaces. More information about Women for a Healthy Environment is available at www.WomenForAHealthyEnvironment.org