



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press Statement

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CAP Urges Standards for Lead in Paints

In conjunction with the International Lead Poisoning Prevention Week, the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) reiterates our call to the Malaysian government to eliminate lead in paint through regulatory action.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized 25–31 October 2020, as International Lead Poisoning Prevention Week to raise awareness and promote actions to address the health impacts of lead exposure, especially on children, pregnant women and workers.

Lead is harmful at all levels of exposure, thus there is no safe level of lead exposure. Children especially aged six and under are particularly vulnerable to lead exposure. Once lead enters a child's body through ingestion, inhalation, or across the placenta, it has the potential to damage several biological systems and pathways.

Even relatively low levels of exposure can cause serious and irreversible neurological damage. When a young child is exposed to lead, the harm to her or his nervous system makes it more likely that the child will have difficulties in school.

The WHO calls lead paint “a major flashpoint” for children's potential lead poisoning and says that “since the phase-out of leaded petrol, lead paint is one of the largest sources of exposure to lead in children.” Thus, urgent measures need to be taken to reduce critical sources of lead exposure to young children, in particular lead paint.

In a recent test conducted by CAP in collaboration with IPEN (International Pollutants Elimination Network), 48 cans of spray paints were purchased online and from various stores in Penang. The paints represented 16 different brands and were analysed using a handheld X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) chemical analyzer.

Out of 48 samples, 12 samples were found to contain lead. Two samples were found to contain lead greater than 10,000 ppm (parts per million), out of which the highest contained 19,261 ppm lead.

Paint in aerosol cans is used as touch-up paint for appliances, cars, accessories and decors, as well as a material for school projects. Besides lead, users of spray paints are also exposed to the fumes due to their volatile organic compound (VOC) ingredients like acetone, toluene and xylene which can be directly inhaled.

In a previous study conducted by CAP in 1992 it was found that seven out of nine enamel paints contained lead above 600 parts per million. The highest amount of lead in that study was 11,700 ppm. In another study of lead content in paints, 72 enamel paints purchased in Malaysia during the years 2004 to 2007 found high amount of lead in the samples tested.

In 2016, CAP had made similar calls to the government to set a standard for lead in paint as we found more than 60% of the samples tested contained exceedingly high lead levels. Almost four years has passed since then but the Malaysian government has yet to formulate laws and standard on lead in paints.

Last year CAP's analysis found 11 out of 17 samples of lead-coated playground equipment in the northern region of Malaysia had dangerously high lead levels above 10,000 ppm.

Presently there is no regulation in Malaysia limiting the amount of lead in paint for household and decorative use. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) reported that 40% of all countries in the world have lead paint laws, as of September 2020.

Voluntary national standards are not effective. UNEP states that to protect human health, laws, regulations or enforceable standards are needed in every country to stop the manufacture, sale and import of lead-containing paints.

The current standard for decorative paints for example in Canada, China, the Philippines, India, Nepal, Kenya, Tanzania and the United States of America is a total maximum lead content of 90 ppm.

Countries, like Malaysia that have only put in place legally binding controls on lead coatings used on children's toys are not counted toward achieving the goal of the Global Alliance to Eliminate Lead Paint.

In view of the dangers of lead and taking into consideration that lead paint elimination is gaining momentum globally, CAP calls on the Malaysian government to promulgate and enforce law to eliminate lead in paint.

Malaysia should not be complacent. As lead has strong and detrimental impact on children, immediate action needs to be taken to safeguard our future generation.

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