



A word of warning

Dimethyl fumarate is the methyl ester of fumaric acid and can be used to treat certain medical conditions.

While not quite in the same category as 'hazardous' substances such as chrome VI, it nevertheless remains one of the most potent sensitisers around and it is for this reason that the EU classifies it as being 'harmful'. If used in the manufacture of a product, its presence should be indicated with the appropriate symbol, as shown above, plus the word 'harmful'.

First it was furniture

It is also used as a mould inhibitor, particularly in Asia during the monsoon season and this is where the recent problems have started. The risk of medical complications its use can pose came to light two years ago with the widely publicised 'poison chair' incident. A Finnish retailer imported a consignment of two-seater leather sofas from China only to have 60 of his customers develop serious skin rashes. The cause was identified as being an allergic reaction to dimethyl fumarate, sachets of which had been placed inside the arms of the sofas to prevent mould developing during transport and storage.

The same thing then happened in the UK, when sofas sold by Argos, Land of Leather and Walmsley Furnishing containing sachets of the chemical allegedly caused over a hundred injuries. Argos withdrew the sofas from its stores and collected those already sold. Land of Leather withdrew its stock without notifying customers, while Walmsley said it had removed the sachets from sofas sold once the danger was realised. Customer complaints cover both those sold with sachets and those where they were removed and the two companies now face a £10 million court action for not following Argos' example, which could prove to be an expensive mistake.



An Etam store in France. Another company caught up in the scandal, Etam hastily withdrew all suspect stock from its stores
CREDIT: ETAM GROUP