

FRENCH SCANDAL

Some of the cases of skin ailments and allergic reactions linked to footwear in France last autumn were traced back to the Etam retail group, which said it had sold almost 900 pairs of the boots and shoes. It said it would try to trace the customers who had bought them and would withdraw the rest of the footwear from that particular consignment from sale. It's not unusual for shoes on sale in French stores these days to be manufactured in China. More than half of imported shoes in France in the first eight months of 2008 came from the Asian country. The French customs authorities puts the figures at 168 million out of 305 million pairs. In value terms, this corresponds to €677 million out of a total value of imported footwear for these eight months of €2.7 billion.

For retailers and consumers to experience the sort of problems suffered by Véronique Homer and others is, thankfully, far from the norm.

The first case came to light in the city of Angers.

A client whom Etam has not named bought footwear from its store there and quickly began to complain of an allergic skin reaction. The customer went to see a dermatologist, who suggested that dimethyl fumarate in the sachets inside the box her patient's new shoes had come in were the likely cause.

Two days later, this response came from Etam headquarters in the Paris suburb of Clichy: "Quality has always been at the heart of what Etam tries to do, and we pay the closest attention possible to each of our customers. So, even though the link between

skin allergies and dimethyl fumarate has not been scientifically proven, Etam has immediately put in place the internal and regulatory procedures required in circumstances like these."

It went on to list the measures it was taking, which included withdrawing from sale all "potentially affected stock", engaging an independent laboratory to carry out tests on the footwear, and notifying the French authorities of its actions. These tests later revealed that some of the items in the consignment did have sachets containing dimethyl fumarate, but others, removed from store-shelves as a precaution, did not.

Etam also brought to an immediate halt "all commercial relations" with the supplier of the suspect shoes and issued a formal instruction to all its suppliers to use no dimethyl fumarate in desiccant sachets or anywhere else. At the same time, the company issued an immediate refund to clients it was able to identify as having bought footwear from this consignment. Customer loyalty statements showed 360 names on this list, but Etam acknowledged that this represented only a third of affected customers.

We can assume the other two-thirds either made their way to Etam stores to request a refund or suffered no adverse reaction and continued wearing the boots and shoes they had bought. Some of those consumers may have remained oblivious to the whole brouhaha, but we must hope that footwear manufacturers and their suppliers the world over, as well as their retail clients, will heed the lesson from this incident.

Now it's footwear

Now it's happened in France but, this time, it is Chinese-made footwear under the spotlight.

In October, Véronique Homer, a retailer in Ingrandes-sur-Loire (Maine-et-Loire) began to feel itching and burning sensations in her foot after wearing a pair of boots she had just bought. As she explained to Agence France Presse: "After a few hours, my foot was swollen and very painful, almost as if it was on fire."

This merely confirmed a more widespread problem it had been told of by the authorities in Paris. Once again the cause was traced back to sachets of dimethyl fumarate which this time had been placed inside the shoe boxes to inhibit mould during transit. Another company caught up in the scandal was retail group Etam, which hastily withdrew all suspect stock from its stores (see *panel above*).

Ask questions

So how could a chemical that was contained inside a sachet and which had no physical contact with the boots or shoes concerned cause such a serious problem? Quite easily if you take the trouble to find out how it works. Dimethyl fumarate is what is known

as a 'sublime' material. In other words, it is one where a solid 'sublimates' or changes into a gas without passing through the normal intermediate aqueous stage. This is why it can be used as an inhibitor where, as it warms in the box, it gradually changes into the gas which prevents mould from developing.

Unfortunately, this gas is also absorbed into the upper and lining of the shoe from which it quickly transfers to infect the skin of a warm foot. It is dangerous stuff. While European laboratories report a steady increase in testing for hazardous substances in materials used in the manufacture of footwear, mould inhibition is one area that appears to have slipped under the net. Fortunately, there are perfectly safe and well proven mould inhibitors freely available such as chloride strips and silica gel.

Coming so soon after the melamine in the milk fiasco in China, we must hope that more care will now be taken by its manufacturers as to what chemical substances they use in connection with their products. Don't bank on it though and, if you are sourcing materials or finished footwear from anywhere for that matter, make sure you know what chemicals are being used in the product and packaging and what effect they might have on your customers even if they do come in little bags. So, be careful. 🌐