

Major European retail group C&A withdrew from sale two models of footwear for small children after a consumer magazine carried out tests on sample shoes and revealed the presence of chromium VI in the leather. The retailer felt it had no choice but to react immediately.



Chrome VI provokes chain reaction

Earlier this year retail group C&A issued a recall notice for two models of baby shoes after tests showed signs of chrome VI in the leather. The shoes were designed to be among the very first shoes parents buy for small children, falling into a category called Krabbelschuhe (shoe for crawling in) in German.

The shoes went on sale in September 2010 and C&A sold around 20,000 pairs in its stores in 18 European countries before a consumer magazine in Germany, *Oekotest*, got in touch to say it had tested the product in an independent laboratory and found that the sample contained chrome VI. German C&A stores sold 6,300 pairs of the shoes before their withdrawal. Consumer organisations there have spoken out on several occasions about the possible health problems attributed to chrome VI, helping to convince a number of specialist children's footwear brands to focus on chrome-free leather shoes in their ranges. In this instance, C&A said that parents who

had bought the shoes could have a refund or a replacement product. "We are deeply sorry that these shoes went on sale and apologise to our customers," said company spokesman Thorsten Rolfes in a statement.

Strict testing

The retail group went on to say that the shoe models—which came in a variety of colours, some with animal designs on the vamp—had come through a strict product testing programme that the company runs and suggested that chrome III, used in the tanning process, and free from health risks to consumers of finished products, had later oxidised into chrome VI. In the tests that the company carried out, no chrome VI showed up in samples.

Another company spokesperson, Julia Ley, has explained that the footwear (which, curiously, C&A only ever called leather baby shoes) was manufactured by a



A C&A store in Berlin. The retail group sold 20,000 pairs of its shoes for small children before chrome VI showed up in the leather during tests on samples. The company recalled the product right away. CREDIT: WIKIPEDIA/ELY1

partner in China, using leather tanned in China. C&A's policy is to put merchandise made in China through a quality audit programme there before shipping the goods to Europe for distribution to its stores. "C&A had the shoes checked by accredited laboratories before they were shipped," Ms Ley says. "All tests were negative; they did not show any presence of chromium VI. This substance therefore must have developed at a later stage, either in transit or in storage at the stores."

Healthy lifestyle

The Frankfurt-based magazine that has been in circulation in Germany for more than 25 years, is devoted to promoting healthy and environmentally friendly lifestyles for families, and specialises in testing consumer products to make sure they comply with safety standards and to check that they work the way manufacturers claim they do. At the start of 2011, it published a guide for the year to products for little children. In the course of compiling this special publication, the magazine tested more than 750 products and included the C&A baby shoes in a series of random tests. When C&A learned that these tests had shown chrome VI to be present in a sample of the shoes, the retailer immediately commissioned specialist German testing and research organisation TÜV to carry out further analysis.

"When the results were confirmed in our own tests, we immediately removed the shoes from our stores," Ms Ley continues. "We informed the authorities and decided to take no risk and recalled sold products from our customers in all European countries."

Scientific interest

When some of the dust had settled, the International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies (IULTCS) followed up with the retail group over the issue of chrome VI to ask for more detail about the tests that had taken place. The organisation wanted to know what

methods had been employed during the original tests carried out on C&A's behalf in the country of production, as well as in Europe. IULTCS was also interested to know what levels of chrome VI were found and what limits C&A is willing to accept. "As an industry the issue of chrome VI can easily be misunderstood and in the wrong hands can be hugely detrimental," IULTCS said. "We would be glad to make an initial approach to C&A or their representatives to better understand this issue from a scientific viewpoint and offer resources to ensure facts are correctly addressed."

It should be noted that no figures for any of the tests have been released by the magazine or the retailer. In 2007, another consumer publication in Germany ran a story on traces of hexavalent chrome in children's shoes, when their test indicated that the limit had been exceeded by 5% (the equivalent of 0.15mg per kilo).

At the time, three other European test houses suggested the level was satisfactory. With test houses trying to identify such small fractions, it would be interesting to know what the actual levels were in the tests carried out. Without greater transparency consumers are unable to make an informed judgement.

The leather industry is confident parents will continue to prefer shoes made from its natural product to footwear from synthetic materials, but incidents such as this one at C&A show how sensitive an issue product safety is. Retailers want to take no chances; consumers want to hear no excuses. Care over the possible existence of chrome VI is required from everyone in the supply chain. 🌐



German consumer magazine Oekotest included the C&A shoes in its review of products for small children for 2011.

CREDIT: OEKOTEST