Keep your eyes open when shopping for souvenirs! TÜV Rheinland tests toys, sunglasses and soccer shirts across Europe: Alarming results

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TÜV Rheinland has completed its third major European shopping trip. This year, toys, sunglasses and soccer shirts were on the shopping list. Our experts made discoveries in popular vacation regions both on the beach and in souvenir and discount shops. As in previous years, however, our testers have not been able to sound the all-clear. 52 out of the 134 articles purchased failed to conform to minimum European Union requirements. This means they are not permitted to be sold within the EU as they do not meet the basic safety standards and labeling requirements. Particularly alarming is the situation regarding the toys that were tested. “Of the 45 toys purchased, 28 were found to have defects, some of them serious,” explains Prof. Ralf Wilde, Executive Vice President Products at TÜV Rheinland. “In addition to small parts that can be swallowed, we also discovered jamming

points and shortcomings in electrical safety. These products pose a safety hazard to children and should not be sold in this state.”

The leisure articles costing between 99 cents and around 20 euros were purchased over the last few weeks in popular vacation regions in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain both on the beach and in souvenir and discount stores – in other words, in places where many vacationers and families with children shop for leisure products for their vacation. The products were then tested in TÜV Rheinland’s test laboratories in Cologne and Nuremberg.

Every second toy poses a safety risk

One of the focal points of this year’s test was the purchase of toys. In total, the testers purchased 45 toys in various popular vacation regions: 11 products in Spain, 13 in Italy, 11 in the Netherlands and 10 products in Germany. The purpose of the testing was to ascertain whether these products conform to the EU Toy Safety Directive. 28 of the products did not conform, failing to meet the mechanical and chemical requirements. The mechanical testing involved critically examining the toys for defects including sharp corners and edges, small parts that can be swallowed, possible jamming points and electrical safety risks.

Our experts made some alarming discoveries. Every second product failed the mechanical tests. A particular problem was posed by small parts that can break off the toy and be swallowed, causing a child to choke. The testers found small parts of this kind in seven of the products. Another nine products were found to have electrical safety problems. Here, batteries were freely accessible, creating a risk of short-circuits. Other safety risks were posed by jamming points or the use of highly flammable materials.

Eight products also failed the chemical tests. TÜV Rheinland's testers discovered that four of the toys inspected contained concentrations of phthalate plasticizers that exceeded the permitted limit for toys. Phthalates are suspected of having hormonal effects and of being carcinogenic. Two other products contained high levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH). These are also suspected of being carcinogenic and are toxic. From a technical point of view, it is possible to avoid these materials. A bubble gun was found to contain microbiologically contaminated liquid. Another product infringed environmental requirements with its high content of heavy metals. "These toys pose a danger to children and therefore must not be given to them to play with. The important thing here is to ensure at Europe's borders that dangerous products of this kind cannot not find their way onto the market because the safety risks they pose are often not immediately apparent to the consumer," said Ralf Wilde, summing up the results.

Sunglasses under a dark cloud

In addition to toys, TÜV Rheinland also purchased and tested 60 pairs of sunglasses: 16 from Germany, 12 from Italy, 17 from the Netherlands and 15 from Spain. Here too, some of the results were alarming. Defects, in some cases serious, were discovered in almost every second pair. The sunglasses were tested for the level of UV protection they afforded, traffic-suitability, quality of workmanship and impact resistance. 40% of the glasses tested failed to pass the experts' tests. In the case of seven pairs of glasses, the lenses were so badly made, with impurities in the glass itself, that the wearer is given the constant impression of looking through dirty glass. In a further six pairs, the lenses were so poorly manufactured that optical distortions occur when the wearer looks through them. Wearers are unable to see clearly through the glasses and in some cases are forced to squint due to the way they are manufactured. This

can, for example, seriously impair road traffic safety and can also give rise to health problems such as headaches or nausea. Four pairs of sunglasses were found to be unsuitable for use when driving and did not come with the warning notice that is required in such cases. Dark or colored glasses are not permitted to be worn when driving as they can cause problems in tunnels or impair recognition of traffic light colors, for example. Furthermore, the lenses of seven pairs of glasses shattered in a ball drop test. If the resulting splinters got into the eyes, this could irreparably damage the wearer's vision. Four of the sunglasses purchased also failed to provide 100% UV protection. Dr. Patrick Niklaus, TÜV Rheinland's eye protection expert, draws the following sorry conclusion: "Many of the glasses purchased impair vision. Most of the defects could be avoided through better production and the use of better materials. False economies are being made here."

Textiles perform slightly better

Our test purchasers' shopping also included 10 soccer shirts from Spain, 10 from Italy, 5 from the Netherlands and 4 from Germany. The results for these products were a little better. All the statutory limits were observed. None of the 29 children's shirts were found to contain conspicuous levels of toxic substances or allergy-inducing substances. However, the quality of most of the products was inadequate. We would therefore not recommend purchasing these cheap goods, as the joy spread by the T-shirts is short-lived. Consumers need to guard against making such purchases on a vacation whim. In 21 of the products, the fabrics, finishing and colors left much to be desired. An unsymmetrical fit, smeared printing and imperfect workmanship at the seams were detected in many of the test pieces. Furthermore, in 21 of the 29 shirts the care instructions were found to be inadequate. Ralf Wilde adds: "With cheap goods of dubious origin such as these, it can only be assumed that the goods were produced in conditions with poor environmental and social

standards too.”

Overview of test basis

The 134 items were tested over the last few weeks in the TÜV Rheinland laboratories in Cologne and Nuremberg. The testing took as its basis the minimum requirements of the European safety standards, to which every product intended for sale in the European Union must conform. Most importantly, these include the safety regulations relating to toys (2009/48/EC as well as EN 71 and EN 62115), the chemicals regulation REACH 1907/2006 EC (Annex XVII: ban on specific phthalates) and the DIN EN 1836:2007 standard for sunglasses.

A European problem

This is the third time that TÜV Rheinland has tested recreational products from popular European vacation regions. A negative trend can be extrapolated. Each test revealed serious defects in terms of the quality and safety of the products – regardless of where they were purchased. In 2009, more than 60% of the purchased articles failed the tests, in 2010 more than 35% and in 2012 up to 40%. The defects were also comparable in nature. The products displayed both chemical and mechanical problems. Ralf Wilde: “The inadequate safety of cheap leisure products is a European problem, not a national one. We have European regulations that specify clear minimum requirements. Products of this kind should not be allowed onto the market in Europe. What we have here, however, is an enforcement problem, as there is hardly any effective monitoring of products, with insufficient reliability for consumers as a result. The current monitoring mechanisms and punitive measures do not seem to be working. Something needs to change.”

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