

Consumers Union: Liquid detergent packets would be safer under new bill in Congress

- Detergent PACS Act would set safety standards to help protect young children from harm
- Poison control centers report increase in calls about child exposures to packets

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of Consumer Reports, today endorsed a new bill in Congress to require safety standards for liquid detergent packets.

Poison control centers have reported an increase in calls about young children who come into contact with the packets. A child may mistake the packet for candy because of its bright, colorful appearance and soft texture. Some children who have gotten the product in their mouths have experienced severe reactions, such as excessive vomiting, lethargy, and breathing problems serious enough to require a ventilator. From 2012 to 2013 the National Poison Data System received 17,230 calls involving children exposed to the packets.

To address this problem, U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier (Calif.) and U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin (Ill.) today introduced the Detergent Poisoning And Child Safety Act, or the Detergent PACS Act, in the House and Senate.

The bills direct the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to issue safety standards within a year and a half to protect children under 5 from the risks of injury or illness caused by exposure to liquid detergent packets. The standards would require special child-resistant packaging on the outer container. The standards would have to address the design and color of the packets to make them less attractive to children, and reduce the likelihood of exposure to detergent. The standards must also address the composition of the packets to make the consequences of exposure less severe, and prescribe warning labels to adequately inform consumers of the types and severity of hazards, and what to do to avoid injury.

The bills would allow a voluntary industry standard to become the safety standard in lieu of a mandatory CPSC standard if it protects children as described above, would be in effect no later than one year after enactment, and is developed by ASTM International, a nonprofit standards-setting organization.

Ellen Bloom, Senior Director of Federal Policy for Consumers Union, said the bills would address several concerns about these products.

Bloom said, "We applaud the lawmakers who introduced this important legislation to help make these products safer. It only takes a few seconds for a child to mistake a packet for candy, grab it, burst it, and be exposed to the packet's contents. The super-concentrated detergent inside can make a child terribly sick in just a few minutes. Liquid detergent packets are getting more and more popular, but the protections for safety are completely inadequate, despite the known hazards. The research shows that these packets are much more likely to cause injury compared to traditional types of detergent."

Consumers Union has pressed manufacturers and policymakers to make these products safer, and urged adults to keep these packets out of reach of children.