CENTER FOR PET SAFETY®

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Center for Pet Safety: Pet Toys are the #1 Cause of Injury and Death of Companion Animals Reported to Organization

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Scope

Center for Pet Safety (CPS) has reviewed pet product complaints filed by pet owners. We have conducted several hundred interviews with pet owners to capture additional incident details and veterinary records. The accumulation of data points to pet toys as the #1 cause of injury and death of companion animals reported to our organization.

Background

Center for Pet Safety is raising the alarm about the dangers to pets and the impact to their human families caused by pet toys. Pet toys pose a serious risk to the health, safety, and welfare of companion animals and are implicated in a significant number of pet injuries and deaths every year. The pet toy market segment is estimated at $10.6 billion and has no independent safety standards, oversight or mandatory reporting of injuries and deaths.

Purpose

Working in the interest of the consumer, Center for Pet Safety looks to other institutions that monitor and regulate consumer product safety for a comparison of injury count vs. recalls.

> In the instance that a consumer product injures or kills a child, the product comes under scrutiny.
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> - In an American Association of Pediatrics report dated October 17, 2017, "Since 2006, 347 incidents related to bouncer seats have been reported, including 12 deaths, concussions and skull fractures."
> - According to the CPSC Website: U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and Fisher-Price are alerting consumers to at least 13 reported deaths between 2009 and 2021 of infants in Fisher-Price Infant-to-Toddler Rockers and Newborn-to-Toddler Rockers.
> - According to a CPSC sourced spreadsheet: In 2017 and 2019, dressers were recalled due to tip-over risks that killed 9 children across the two brands of dressers recalled.

In these instances, offending products were recalled and/or removed from the marketplace to ensure no additional child injuries or deaths resulted.

Pet products are not classified as consumer products, so other than consumables and pharmaceuticals, there is no oversight of pet products on the market. Dangerous and poor-

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quality pet products are on store shelves, and the injury and death rates of pets are exponentially higher than consumer products due to the lack of regulation. The actual statistics are not tracked by any official entity.

At the time of this report our data indicates:

- 83% of pet toy complaints detail emergency veterinary intervention due to Gastro-intestinal (GI) obstructions.
- 25% (of the 83%) of those pet toy complaints detail fatalities caused by GI obstruction, perforation or sepsis.

Pet owners purchase toys marketed as appropriate for pets from brand websites, major brick and mortar retailers, online retailers, pet boutiques and other third-party sales outlets. While some pet toys have warnings on the product packaging regarding the need for supervision and warning of choking hazards, they do not warn of potential injury or death.

Center for Pet Safety has determined that the primary risk of injury and death from pet toys is due to the indigestible materials used to fabricate most of the pet toys on the market.

Illustrative Example

Dog A: A 75 lb. Labrador is given a digestible pet toy.
Dog B: A second 75 lb. Labrador is given a pet toy made of indigestible materials.

- The dogs have similar bite strengths.
- The dogs chew on their toys.
- Dog A: The toy does not last as long in play; the dog consumes the digestible toy.
- Dog B: Pieces of the indigestible toy are swallowed by the dog.

With all things being equal, Dog B is at a far higher risk of injury and death due to swallowing indigestible materials.

While not all pets have experienced a GI obstruction caused by a pet toy, the indigestible materials, if swallowed, directly increase the risk of emergency veterinary surgical intervention and the increased risk of death of the companion animal.

The number of reported incidents leads us to ask:

- How many injuries and deaths are acceptable before a pet product is removed from the marketplace?
- How many pet owners must endure financial hardship (i.e.: extensive veterinary bills) when their beloved pet has been injured or killed by a pet toy made of indigestible materials?
- When will pet product brands be held accountable for the products that they bring to market that injure and kill companion animals?

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Disturbing Trends
Center for Pet Safety has also documented disturbing pet toy fabrication trends coming out of the pet products industry.

- Manufacturers are increasingly adding flavorings and scents and embedding herbal enticements (i.e. catnip) into indigestible materials to improve the engagement of the pet.
- Another trend has been the development of treat toys - fabricated of indigestible materials and designed to house digestible treats. These toys are commonly labeled as “interactive”, “engaging”, or “stimulating” for the pet. Combining these materials allows for the digestible treat to scent and add flavor to the indigestible material. It is not uncommon for a pet to transfer their focus from the digestible treat to the indigestible material and swallow a piece of the indigestible material.

These design and fabrication practices significantly increase the risk of ingestion of indigestible materials by companion animals as they chew or play with the toy, and in turn, significantly increase the risk of injuries and deaths.

Materials of Concern
Plastic, nylon, rubber, latex, silicone, animal remnants (bully sticks, hooves, horns, bones, hides, etc.), plush and other fabrics, metals, nylon webbing, string, fiberfill stuffing, other stuffing, squeakers, crinkle plastics, wire, batteries, wood, twigs, cocoa fiber, etc.

Emergency Veterinary Intervention
Interviews with pet owners whose pets have been injured or killed by pet toys indicates an alignment on treatment options and costs. Treatment options include:

1. An injection to cause the pet to expel the offending toy component.
2. An endoscopic procedure to remove the offending toy component.
3. A surgical procedure (the most common) to remove the offending toy component. In many cases, the damage is too severe, and the pet needs to be euthanized.

An overwhelming number of pet owners have reported the same fee structures for treatment of the ingestion of indigestible pet toy components.

- Endoscopic procedures typically cost $4,000.00 U.S. dollars.
- Surgical procedures typically cost $8,000.00 U.S. dollars.
- If multiple surgical procedures are required, which is not uncommon, the treatment costs can easily exceed $15,000.00 U.S. dollars.

Whether these fees are covered by pet insurance depends on the policy terms and conditions; however, in most of the reported cases the pet owner was financially responsible for the entirety of the emergency procedure.

Other Safety Considerations
While ingestion of indigestible materials has been identified as a primary risk of injury and death of companion animals by our organization, it is not the only risk.

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- If the toy is harder than the fracture limits of the pet's teeth, then the risk of damage to the teeth increases.[1,2] The toy causes injury or breakage of the teeth requiring costly dental extraction procedures which may include root canals.
- Injuries to gums and tongue.
- Chew toys made of animal remnants may be contaminated with salmonella. This is a risk to both the pet and the pet owner.
- Chew toys made of animal remnants (bones, hooves, antlers…etc.) may easily fracture into sharp shards resulting in injury or require surgical intervention if the shards are swallowed.
- Poorly designed treat toys do not have vacuum release ports thus causing the dog's tongue to get sucked into the toy during play, in many cases, this leads to partial or full amputation of the tongue or euthanasia of the dog.
- Poorly designed electronic treat dispensers do not have appropriate sensors to halt rotation of the dispenser when obstructed and cause injury to the dog.
- Pet toys that incorporate string or nylon webbing may lead to a linear foreign body. The linear piece of string or unraveled nylon webbing perforates the intestines in single or multiple sites as it processes through the GI tract, requiring emergency surgery and probable death due to extensive damage caused by the toy.
- Bully stick holders that include metal or sharp components cut the dog's tongue during play.

Because companion animals use their mouths to engage with toys, eliminating choking hazards will be difficult.

Fabrication Concerns

CPS has also received ample reports of poor manufacturing practices and quality control issues.

Below are a few examples:

- Rubber chew toys purchased through multiple retail outlets have been reported to easily crumble within minutes of play.
- Poor quality materials or construction of plush toys leads to the pet swallowing a component.
- Packages of animal remnant toys (i.e.: pig ears) infested with beetles.
- Strings, stitching and decorative stitching unravels and is swallowed by the pet leading to linear foreign body incidents that increase the risk of death.
- Chemical hardening or release agents applied to some toys or molds create potentially toxic exposure for both the pet and the pet owner.
- Inflation needles are left inside of the pet toy leading to potential puncture of the dog's palate and potential injury to the human companion.
- Wire used to support the structure of some pet toys pokes through fabric and injures pets or breaks away from the toy during play and is ingested by the pet.
- Empty plastic water bottles and empty soda cans are sometimes used as pet toy stuffings or structural support.
- We have also received reports of trash found inside of plush toys.

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Manufacturer Accountability

- The pet owner is typically offered a refund or a credit for the cost of the toy involved.
- The manufacturer does not typically offer to cover the veterinary bills incurred by pet owners when a pet is injured or dies from the use of the toy that the brand manufactures.
- Our organization has received several highly disturbing accounts from pet owners who report the injury or death of their pet to the manufacturer of the toy. The manufacturer's representative belittles and blames the pet owner. This makes an already heart-wrenching situation even worse for the pet owner. These practices are causing harm to consumers.
- On rare occasion, a manufacturer agrees to reimburse the pet owner for veterinary fees and/or animal replacement costs. When this happens, the pet owner is typically required to sign legal agreements stating that the brand is not at fault and the pet owner cannot speak publicly about the incident. This process allows a dangerous product to remain on the market for other unassuming pet owners to purchase.

Recommendations for Pet Owners

1. Before purchasing any pet toy, you should evaluate the temperament of your pet to determine if they engage in aggressive or destructive play. Assessing your pet's play behavior will allow you to assess the risk of ingestion of indigestible materials. **If your pet exhibits aggressive or destructive play, select only digestible pet toys.**
2. When assessing product reviews online, look at the lowest scored reviews first. It is common for positive product reviews to be subsidized by manufacturers in lieu of discounts on future purchases. Upon review of product complaints, we found that the lowest scored reviews typically align with the injuries/deaths reported to our organization.
3. Soft-mouthed pets or pets that engage in gentle play are at a lower risk of ingesting an indigestible component of a pet toy; however, a risk remains due to varied quality control and manufacturing-related incidents reported.
4. Read the entirety of the product package – including product warnings – and assess the risk potential for your pet.
5. No pet toy is indestructible.
6. Remove and dispose of damaged toys.
7. Supervision is highly recommended, but it is not 100% fail-safe. Pet owners who are actively supervising their pets during play have reported that the pet will suddenly ingest a piece of the toy.
8. Even with the selection of digestible toys, a choking risk remains.
9. Center for Pet Safety strongly recommends that pet owners select fully digestible pet toy options.
    a. Large caliper carrots, broccoli stems, and asparagus can make for affordable, natural, digestible toy alternatives.

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   b. There are many manufactured digestible pet toy options on the market. Center for Pet Safety has launched the Center for Pet Safety Safer Choice program to help guide pet owners to safer options for their pets. This list will continue to expand as we identify new digestible options that meet our evaluation criteria. We have also published a Pet Toy Risk Guide as a free downloadable resource for pet owners.
10. CPS recommends that pet owners contribute a monthly stipend into a High Yield Savings Account of their choice to help manage emergency veterinary bills. A recommended savings goal is between $8,000 - $15,000. (This range should increase if you have multiple pets.)

Recommendations for Manufacturers

1. Pet product brands should innovate and focus on creating quality digestible pet toys to prevent injuries and deaths.
2. Manufacturers should develop quality control testing and monitoring programs to reduce the injuries and deaths caused by quality control issues.
3. Manufacturers must add a clear warning label on all pet toys that are constructed from or contain indigestible materials. The warning should state the possibility of injury or death if any part of the toy is swallowed by the pet.
4. Product warning labels should be no less than 8 pt. type text to ensure pet owners can easily notice and read the warning labels. The term "Warning" should appear in bold text.
5. Manufacturers must allow space on product packaging for retailers to add adhesive pricing labels without covering up product warnings. Guidance should also be provided to retailers and distributors to ensure warning labels are not obscured at the point of sale. When visiting several local pet retail locations, we identified multiple instances where the warning labels were covered or obscured by adhesive pricing labels.
6. Manufacturers should obtain training on compassionate customer service when a pet owner reports the injury or death of a pet. Whether you believe the product you market may be at fault or not, compassionate care of your customer should always be a priority.

Recommendations for Retailers

1. Ensure that pricing labels do not obscure or cover safety warnings on product packaging.
2. Educate your customers. As a retailer you may be implicated in legal proceedings fostered by the injury or death of a pet when the product was purchased at your retail establishment.
3. Retailers should not block or remove low scoring customer complaints.
4. Large scale retailers and third-party sellers should consider removing a pet product from sale when injuries and deaths are reported. We have seen multiple reports of injuries and deaths reported to major online retailers, yet the offending products remain for sale on those websites. Retailers have a responsibility to conduct safety

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monitoring and reduce pet injuries and deaths by removing the offending products from your storefront.

Digestible Materials Testing Note

While conducting the initial product reviews for Center for Pet Safety Safer Choice, we noted that product packaging (or lack thereof) may impact the hardness of some digestible chew options. We are currently testing Yak Cheese Chews and Collagen Chews and will update this report with data once the evaluation is complete. The Center for Pet Safety Safer Choice criteria will be updated accordingly once we have finalized our data collection.

Summary

Pets use their mouths to play with toys of varying design and are encouraged to chew a variety of indigestible materials, sometimes embedded with scents, flavorings and herbal enticements, leading to injuries or deaths. Manufacturing toys of fully digestible materials is a responsible approach and essential to reduce injuries and deaths of companion animals caused by pet toys.

About the Center for Pet Safety®

The Center for Pet Safety (CPS) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit research, advocacy and educational organization dedicated to consumer and companion animal safety. A member of the Consumer Federation of America and based in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area, the Center for Pet Safety's mission is to have an enduring, positive impact on the survivability, health, safety, and well-being of companion animals and the consumer through scientific research and product testing. CPS is not affiliated with the pet products industry and does not accept funding from pet products manufacturers. Welcome to the Science of Pet Safety®. For additional information, visit https://CenterforPetSafety.org.

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