

Brussels, 29 January 2009

Consumers: EU to ban dimethylfumarate (DMF) in consumer products, such as sofas and shoes

The use of the biocide (DMF) dimethylfumarate - which has caused severe allergic reactions in hundreds of consumers, because of its use in every day consumer products such as couches and shoes - looks set to be banned across the EU. Today, Member States voted in favour of a draft European Commission Decision to ensure that consumer products, such as leather furniture or footwear, containing the strongly sensitising (DMF) are not placed on the market in the EU. If already on the market, these products will have to be recalled and withdrawn without delay. In countries such as France, Finland, Poland, Sweden and the UK, consumers exposed to products containing DMF, have experienced serious health problems including skin itching, irritation, redness, burns and, in some cases, acute respiratory difficult. The draft Commission decision is for an emergency EU wide measure, pending the adoption of a more permanent regulatory solution. Following today's vote, the draft Commission decision will be submitted for consultation to the European Parliament before going before the College of Commissioners for final approval.

EU Consumer Affairs Commissioner Meglena Kuneva, said: "There can be no compromise on safety. I am pleased to see that that the RAPEX system has been functioning well to ensure dangerous goods containing DMF are quickly removed from the market. But we need to go further with urgent EU action to tackle the problem at source. An EU wide ban on the use of DMF in all consumer goods is designed to eliminate the serious health risks and in particular the severe allergic reactions suffered by some consumers when they are exposed to this chemical simply by using everyday leather goods."

The risk from DMF

Dimethylfumarate (DMF) is used by producers as a biocide to kill moulds that may cause furniture or shoe leather to deteriorate during storage and transportation in a humid climate. Placed in sachets, which are fixed inside the furniture or added to the footwear boxes, DMF evaporates and impregnates the leather, protecting it from moulds. However, it has been found to seriously affect consumers who were in contact with the products. DMF penetrated through the clothes onto the skin of many consumers¹, where it caused painful dermatitis. The fact that in serious cases it is particularly difficult to treat adds to the damage. The presence of DMF is thus a serious risk.

The dangerous chemical initially raised concerns when notified by a number of Member State authorities through the EU rapid alert system for dangerous non-food consumer products (RAPEX).

¹ Williams JDL, et al (2008) An outbreak of furniture dermatitis in the U.K. . British Journal of Dermatology 159: 233-234.

The notifications related to sofas, armchairs and shoes, and clinical tests confirmed that the dermatitis suffered by consumers in contact with these products was caused by DMF². France and Belgium subsequently put national bans in place and Spain is also preparing to do so. The new Decision which was agreed today will cover all Member States.

The existing rules

DMF is already banned for use in the manufacture of goods in the EU, since biocidal products containing DMF are not authorised under the Biocides Directive (98/8/EC). However, manufacturers outside the EU may use these unauthorised biocides and then export their products to the EU. Today's Decision therefore protects EU consumers from the risk of DMF in imported products in the same way as they are protected at home.

Recent measures introduced by Member States

In December 2008, France adopted a decree³ which bans the importation and placing on the market of seating and footwear containing DMF for 1 year. The French decree also requires the recall of all seating and footwear which visibly contains, or the packaging of which visibly contains, DMF. In January 2009, Belgium issued a decree⁴, which bans the placing on the market of all articles and products containing DMF. Spain is considering introducing a measure.

Background - RAPEX

RAPEX is the EU rapid alert system for dangerous non-food consumer products, providing a rapid exchange of information between Member States and the Commission to prevent marketing or use of products posing a serious risk to the health and safety of consumers.

For further information see:

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/safety/rapex/index_en.htm

² Rantanen T (2008) The cause of the Chinese sofa/chair dermatitis epidemic is likely to be contact allergy to dimethylfumarate, a novel potent contact sensitizer. Concise communication. British Journal of Dermatology 159: 218-221.

³ Ministry for the Economy, Industry and Employment, Decree of 4 December 2008 suspending the placing on the market of seats and footwear containing DMF from the market. French Official Journal , 10 December 2008, Text 17 of 108.

⁴ The Minister for Public Health and the Minister for Consumer Protection, The Minister for Public Health and the Minister for Consumer Protection, Ministerial Decree concerning the prohibition of placing articles and products containing DMF on the market. Belgian Official Journal , 12.1.2009