



Are Reusable Bags Dangerous?

After a report finds high levels of lead in reusable grocery bags, a U.S. senator calls for the government to investigate

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To help the environment, many Americans have made the switch from paper and plastic bags to reusable grocery bags. But a report by a Florida newspaper says that reusable grocery bags sold by some supermarkets contain high levels of lead. Lead is a metal that can be harmful to humans, especially young children. Now, Senator Charles Schumer, of New York, is asking the U.S. government to investigate the use of lead in reusable shopping bags.

"When our families go to the grocery store looking for safe and healthy foods to feed their kids, the last thing they should have to worry about are toxic bags," Schumer said in a statement. "A quick and thorough investigation will allow everyone to make informed, timely decisions," Schumer added.

Shoppers, Beware

The *Tampa Tribune* newspaper, in Tampa, Florida, bought more than a dozen bags from Florida supermarkets. They paid a lab to test the bags for lead. The results showed that certain bags sold at Publix and Winn-Dixie supermarkets had lead levels that were a concern to health officials. Some bags had enough lead that they could be considered hazardous waste if people were to throw the bags out with their household trash.

Lead in the bags is not likely to rub off on food. But over time, paint on the bags can chip and the bags can wear out. When this happens, lead can be released.

What Consumers Can Do

The affected bags were found in Florida. But Publix has more than 1,000 stores in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee. Publix says that all of its bags comply with current federal laws regarding lead content, but that they have asked the makers of the bags to reduce the lead levels in the product.

Winn-Dixie has hundreds of stores in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi. Officials at Winn-Dixie say refunds will be given to customers who return the bags.

The bags with the highest levels of lead had fancy designs and many pictures. Plain reusable bags without decoration were found to contain little lead. Consumers worried about lead levels in reusable bags can switch to cloth or string bags. Paper bags are also a good choice, since paper can be recycled.

Since 2007, Publix supermarkets have sold more than 13 million reusable bags. The store says because shoppers have made the switch to reusable bags, it has saved more than 1 billion paper and plastic bags.