

Does lead make gaming chips hazardous to your health?

Four weeks after a Phoenix TV station reported that some gambling chips manufactured by a Las Vegas company contained exceptionally high lead content, anxious casino dealers say they still don't know if they're handling toxic materials for a living.

The report put the manufacturer, Gaming Partners International – the world's largest gaming chip maker – on the defensive; the casino industry's trade association said after some delay that the issue is being reviewed, and government health experts shrug.

Some say they agree with the company that today's chips aren't dangerous. Others are tentative. They all note that except for paint, there are no government standards for lead content in consumer goods.

Gaming Partners says it assumes the tested chips were manufactured years ago and contain much more lead than today's chips.

But such assurances have done little to calm concerns of dealers – expressed in break rooms and on Web sites that cater to the dealer and poker communities.

„I was outraged about our exposure to the lead in one of the major tools of our trade,“ one dealer commented on caesarspalacedealers.com, a site intended to unionize dealers.

„Why should we constantly be subjected to toxic poisons and have no say?“ someone else remarked on the site, featuring the headline „Chips Exposed.“

The biggest red flag, dealers said, was a part of the Arizona

story showing particles flying off the chips when dropped. The material tested positive for lead, the station reported.

Another chip was 45 percent lead, the station said.

Joan Claybrook, president of the U.S. Public Interest Research Group in Washington, D.C., said she was shocked by the report and has called for an immediate recall of the company's chips.

Arizona health officials issued a public health alert and notified federal recall authorities as well as government health experts across the country.

With millions of toys pulled from shelves and pending legislation to ban lead in children's products, dealers wondered why casino bosses weren't pulling the tainted chips off the tables.

And little wonder for their concern: The TV report even noted that children could come in contact with lead from the chips.

Gaming Partners strongly denies its products are unsafe, and government lead experts say it would be very unusual for adults to be harmed by handling chips containing lead.

But the company's position isn't getting out. Dealers remain fearful, citing among themselves all the problems with lead poisoning: anemia, infertility and miscarriage in adults, and severe learning disabilities in children.

„There's great concern about this,“ said Debbie Ettinger, a dealer at Caesars Palace.

For all of Nevada's long history with casino chips, few people know what they contain or how they are made. Their ingredients are closely guarded trade secrets and have never been tested by local health officials.

Although some of the first gambling chips were believed to be made of compacted clay, their major component by the 1960s was

a manufactured lead composite. Gaming Partners' predecessor began phasing out lead in the 1990s because of safety concerns for workers who mix powdered ingredients into a dough that is pressed into chip forms.

By 2002 the company's chips had an average lead content of about .5 percent by weight and it is now about .003 percent, said Gaming Partners' chief executive officer, Gerard Charlier. A handful of the more than 70 „edge spot“ colors used to create chips unique to each casino had a lead content of nearly 50 percent in 2002 but were reformulated and by 2006 the lead was removed, Charlier said.

Casinos typically replace old chips with new ones every few years, the company says. But older chips are still in circulation because they end up in the hands of collectors and tourists who take them home. The company also makes souvenir chips sold in gift shops.

The chips tested by Arizona reporters and health experts were probably older ones the company no longer sells directly, Charlier said.

No federal standards exist for lead in consumer products except for paint – the main culprit in recently recalled toys.

When the Arizona Health Services Department a few weeks ago tested Gaming Partners chips purchased from a third-party distributor, it found the chips had a lead content as high as 3 percent – more than 40 times the federal standard for lead paint.

Arizona health officials and other lead experts say the mere presence of lead does not necessarily present a health risk. The danger posed by lead depends on how it appears in a product and how those lead materials are absorbed into the body.

Lead is a heavy substance that gave chips a satisfying heft

and pleasing sound when clicked together. But manufacturers have found similar yet less weighty substitutes in recent years, such as zinc.

Lead rarely enters the body through the skin, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. People exposed to lead at work are typically breathing in particles of lead generated in a heavy manufacturing process. Most lead gets into the body when it is swallowed, by eating or drinking lead-tainted products or by hand-to-mouth contact. Most lead will stay in an adult body for a few weeks, but it survives longer in children, who can be harmed by lower levels of lead than adults.

Even the repeated handling of chips wouldn't be enough to trigger a hazardous level of dust, according to Nevada OSHA, a state agency that follows federal workplace safety standards established by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Gaming Partners maintains that any trace amounts of lead would be largely eliminated by the usual washing of the hands and cleaning of clothes.

But dealers say the peculiarities of their craft make them especially vulnerable.

A skilled worker, merely by touching a stack of chips, will know whether the chips are new or worn down from repeated use. Where is the rest of the chip going, dealers say, but on their hands?

The risk of transferring the particles into the body and suffering from a lead buildup is remote, said Gaming Partners, which is preparing a detailed rebuttal to the Arizona story by attempting to quantify the risks. Results of an independently commissioned test are expected within days.

The chip report by ABC affiliate KNXV Channel 15 in Phoenix

caught casino companies by surprise. News of the report spread through internal memos. At least one casino, Harrah's, posted a notice to employees that it was aware of the issue and was looking into it.

Last week, the American Gaming Association assured workers and the public in a statement that casinos are taking the matter seriously.

„Although the manufacturer has stated that their chips meet all safety standards, we are working with health authorities to determine whether the chips pose any threat to our employees or the public at large,“ Gaming Association CEO Frank Fahrenkopf said. „I can assure you that, should it be determined there is a health concern, the industry will move rapidly to remedy the situation.“

Casino chips aren't made with lead paint but by compressing multiple compounds under intense pressure. OSHA workplace standards involving lead apply to airborne lead dust such as the lead particles generated by, say, smelting copper or firing guns at a shooting range.

„My gut would tell me that the health risk here is very low,“ though to prove that „is tough because you have to make certain assumptions“ based on such variables as hand washing after contact with chips, said Donald Mays, senior director for product safety for Consumers Union.

Arizona health officials are offering blood tests for casino workers there, though results could be inconclusive because dealers can also ingest lead by smoking or breathing secondhand smoke.

„Is it a health concern, adults handling the chips? We honestly don't know,“ said Don Herrington, bureau chief for epidemiology and disease control with the Arizona Health Services Department.

Dr. Keith Zupnik, a registered environmental health specialist and project coordinator of a new childhood lead poisoning detection program at the Southern Nevada Health District, said the agency is focusing on products used by children and hasn't decided whether to test casino chips.

„I really don't know enough about a casino chip to know whether the lead is easily transferred into the environment, though I'm guessing it's not,“ Zupnik said.