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September 27, 2023

Chair Alexander Hoehn-Saric
U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission
4330 East-West Highway
Bethesda, MD 20814

Dear Chair Hoehn-Saric,

I write with serious concerns over reports of young children being hospitalized after ingesting water-absorbing beads that are marketed to parents as educational toys.¹ I urge the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to take steps to remove these dangerous products from the market—especially those that are sold as toys for children.

As you know water-absorbing beads are made from superabsorbent polymers that, when exposed to fluids, can expand to hundreds of times their original size.² While initially developed to help florists keep plants hydrated, they quickly soared in popularity among parents and educators, branded as a toy to “help kids develop fine and gross motor, language, and social skills.”³ However, the bright colored, pea-sized beads often look like gum balls or other candy, creating a risk of ingestion. Once swallowed, the beads can expand in a child’s digestive tract – up to the size of a tennis ball – causing life-threatening intestinal blockage that requires invasive procedures to detect and surgery to remove.⁴

Water-absorbing beads marketed to children have already caused a number of hospitalizations of children and led to the recall and removal of products from market shelves. In 2013, the CPSC and Eco-Novelty issued a recall for Cosmo Beads, a water-absorbing bead, after

¹ Kindelan, Katie, “Mom Says Daughter Remains Hospitalized 1 Month After Swallowing Water Bead Toy,” GMA (Nov. 29, 2022). https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Wellness/mom-daughter-remains-hospitalized-1-month-after-swallowing/story?id=93888256&cid=social_twitter_abcn

² Johnson-Arbor, Kelly, “Are Water Beads Toxic?,” POISON CONTROL (Dec. 8, 2022). <https://www.poison.org/articles/are-water-beads-toxic>

³ Hanlon, Renee, “The Dangers of Water Beads: How a Popular Sensory Toy Could Cause a Trip To the Hospital or Worse,” PARADE (Nov. 11, 2022). <https://parade.com/living/dangers-of-water-beads>

⁴ “Safety Warning: Water Beads Pose Life-Threatening Risks to Kids,” HEALTHY MUMMY (Dec. 31, 2016). <https://www.healthymummy.com/parents-warned-danger-water-beads/>

an 8-month old ingested a similar product that had to be surgically removed.⁵ Almost a decade later, these incidents continue to happen. In January 2023, a 10-month old was hospitalized with critical injuries after swallowing a water-absorbing bead from an activity kit belonging to an older sibling.⁶ This follows a similar story from last year, when a child was hospitalized for a collapsed lung after they aspirated a water-absorbing bead.⁷ Most recently, a 10-month old child in Wisconsin died after unknowingly swallowing a water-absorbing bead from a Buffalo Games activity kit.⁸ This product also caused a 9-month old child in Maine to be hospitalized due to an intestinal obstruction that required surgery.⁹ On September 14, 2023, the CPSC recalled the Buffalo Games Chuckle & Roar Ultimate Water Beads Activity Kits due to ingestion, choking, and obstruction hazards.¹⁰ I applaud the agency for their action, but surveillance is not enough. The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a warning to parents as early as 2016,¹¹ yet consumer still experienced preventable tragedies.

While some products have been removed from the market, different brands remain readily available, especially in online marketplaces, with little to no warning.¹² For example, a search on the Amazon marketplace returns dozens of products marketed as “ideal for keeping kids busy for hours” and promising that they are “fully tested and exceeds all children's toy safety requirements.”¹³ Given the continued widespread marketing of these products and the potential life-threatening injuries to children, it is imperative that the CPSC take the necessary steps to remove these products from the reach of children and unsuspecting parents.

To better understand the risks posed by these products, I request answers to the following questions by October 25, 2023:

⁵ “Eco-Novelty Recalls Jumbo Size and Jumbo Multipurpose Cosmo Bead Toys Due to Serious Ingestion Hazard,” CPSC (Sep. 10, 2013). <https://www.cpsc.gov/Recalls/2013/Eco-Novelty-Recalls-Jumbo-Size-and-Jumbo-Multipurpose-Cosmo-Beads-Toys>

⁶ Kindelan, Katie, “Mom Says Daughter Remains Hospitalized 1 Month After Swallowing Water Bead Toy,” GMA (Nov. 29, 2022). https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Wellness/mom-daughter-remains-hospitalized-1-month-after-swallowing/story?id=93888256&cid=social_twitter_abcn

⁷ Ridley, Jane, “A poison expert warns parents about the dangers of water beads. They can cause blockages in the intestines and lungs if swallowed,” INSIDER (Dec. 1, 2022). <https://www.insider.com/expert-outlines-risk-of-water-beads-after-spate-of-accidents-2022-11>

⁸ Roussell, Christine, “Mom calls for change after her 10-month-old baby dies from swallowing a water bead,” The New York Post (Aug. 23, 2023). <https://nypost.com/2023/08/23/wisconsin-mom-calls-for-change-after-her-10-month-old-baby-dies-from-swallowing-a-water-bead/>

⁹ Shafiq, Saman, “1 death, 1 injury: Water bead toy kits sold at Target recalled for ‘serious injury or death’ risk,” (Sept. 14, 2023). <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2023/09/14/buffalo-games-water-bead-recall/70850528007/>

¹⁰ CSPSC, “Buffalo Games Recalls Chuckle & Roar Ultimate Water Beads Activity Kits Due to Serious Ingestion, Choking and Obstruction Hazards; One Infant Death Reported; Sold Exclusively at Target” (Sept. 14, 2023). <https://www.cpsc.gov/Recalls/2023/Buffalo-Games-Recalls-Chuckle-Roar-Ultimate-Water-Beads-Activity-Kits-Due-to-Serious-Ingestion-Choking-and-Obstruction-Hazards-One-Infant-Death-Reported-Sold-Exclusively-at-Target>

¹¹ Koriath, Trisha, “Water Beads: Harmful if Swallowed, Put in Ears,” AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS (Apr. 6, 2016). <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Water-Beads-Harmful.aspx>

¹² Kindelan, Katie, “Mom Says Daughter Remains Hospitalized 1 Month After Swallowing Water Bead Toy,” GMA (Nov. 29, 2022). https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Wellness/mom-daughter-remains-hospitalized-1-month-after-swallowing/story?id=93888256&cid=social_twitter_abcn

¹³ <https://www.amazon.com/CiaraQ-Rainbow-Growing-Tactile-Decoration/dp/B078X9T9CT/>

1. How many reports has the CPSC received on incidents, in particular injuries to children, involving water-absorbing beads or related products?
2. What mandatory or voluntary standards, or other guidelines to manufactures are in place regarding the safety of water-absorbing beads and related products?
3. What steps has the CPSC taken, or plans to take, to educate parents about the risk of misuse of water-absorbing beads?
4. Is the CPSC considering further action to encompass similar water-absorbing beads?
5. Does the CPSC need additional authorities to ban the use of water-absorbing beads as toys?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate