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.Facility for Analysis of Indoor Accidents Opens

The new Facility for Analysis of Indoor Accidents built on the site of the JCIC product testing and training facilities in Sagamihara City opened on May 12, with a grand ceremony to commemorate its completion attended by Minister of State for Economic Planning ,Taichi Sakaiya and Parliamentary Vice –minister ,Hiroshi Imai.

Minister Sakaiya, other guests and journalists toured the new facility and were given a presentation by the staff of the product test department. Later, a commemorative tree planting ceremony by Minister Sakaiya and other activities were held.

.Product Test: Diet Tea Products Using “ Senna Stem ”

Recently, many types of tea products and tablets are on sale in Japan using the plant “senna,” a medicinal ingredient for easing constipation used from ancient times. These products are being sold with an image that they alleviate constipation, and also help control weight, but are there any problems with their ingredients and labeling? JCIC staff examined 24 brands of tea products containing “senna stem,” 9 tablet products, as well as 2 brands of “herb tea” being sold with a similar sales pitch, even though they do not claim to contain senna stem. A total of 35 brands/products were tested.

[Quality]

In all 35 products (that are supposed to be food supplements) we detected the pharmaceutical ingredient “sennoside”, which has a “laxative” effect. There were even products that exceeded the maximum dosage for one portion stipulated for “sennoside” as a pharmaceutical product.

Actually, sennoside is not supposed to be detected from “senna stem.” We believe that the reason why we detected “sennoside” in this test is related to the fact that leaf stem (a part of the senna leaf) was detected in all the products, and that senna leaf parts were detected in 70% of

them. At present, there is no clear regulation as to whether or not the leaf stem is a pharmaceutical product. However, the fact that leaf stems containing “sennoside” are included in a “food supplement” is certainly a matter of concern.

Furthermore, the 18 brands of tea in which the senna leaf parts were detected appear to be in violation of the Pharmaceutical Affairs Law.

Also, according to the labels of ingredients, there were some products that claim to include “gimnema sylvestre,” but there are as yet no established evaluations of the effects brought about by different quantities of this ingredient. Moreover, even for products with labeling that indicated the amount of ingredients, it was not possible to estimate the actual amount they contained.

[Residue of agricultural chemicals, labeling, price, etc.]

When we tested the products to see if there was any contamination from agricultural chemical residue, such as total BHC and DDT, we found two products that exceeded the maximum standards of the Food Sanitation Law (under 0.2 ppm for each chemical) for pharmaceutical senna and for tea-type products.

The labels on the products we tested all project the image that they “alleviate (or cure) constipation” and “help with dieting.” Fourteen of the products included an expression that can be inferred “as having a medicinal effect,” a potential violation of the Pharmaceutical Affairs Law.

The prices of the products tested ranged widely between ¥11 and ¥210 (averaging ¥55) per dosage. On the other hand, the pharmaceutical senna product was priced at ¥8 per dosage.

. Product Test: Passenger Cars That Claim to Be “ Eco-friendly ”

Today, all sorts of products claim to be “friendly to the environment.” Because cars discharge a significant amount of carbon dioxide while running, a number of auto makers have developed cars that emit as little carbon dioxide as possible, and at high fuel efficiency. We picked and tested two models with a direct-injection gasoline engine, one model with a lean-burn engine, one hybrid model with both a gasoline engine and electric motor, as well as a conventional engine car for reference purposes.

[Fuel efficiency]

All four test vehicles performed better than the conventional-engine reference car when driving on city streets, highways, and in hilly and mountainous areas.

[Environmental Impact]

Improved fuel efficiency means that less CO² is discharged. At the same time, emissions of

harmful substances such as CO, HC, and NOX were below the standard. Notably, the overall emissions were significantly lower for the hybrid car.

[Basic Performance]

We also checked basic performance factors such as acceleration and braking. There were some differences in acceleration among the tested cars, but not to the point where we could feel them while driving. There was no problem with braking performance in any of the cars.

[Usability]

None of the cars had any noise problems. The hybrid car, became totally noiseless while stopped, when the air conditioner was off, and it was very quiet overall.

Except for the hybrid car, there was hardly any sense of strangeness when we drove the test cars after driving the conventional car. The hybrid model, however, had a number of handling differences. It didn't make any special noise when first starting; its brakes work differently; and other than the normal D range, gear shifting includes only the braking range.

[Purchasing advice]

- [1] The fuel efficiency listed in the catalogs was attained under very specific conditions, so you should not expect similar results all the time.
- [2] The hybrid type is very distinctive in many ways, and as a low-pollution car, it is given a significant tax preference.

. DANGER! Power windows pose hazards to Young children

Power windows in cars are convenient, simple to use and widely available now. There have been many accidents reported involving power windows, including infants suffocating to death when their necks were caught in the closing window. A large number of cases involving “injuries to fingers being caught in a power window” have been reported to the JCIC Consumer Injury Information System by consumer centers and cooperating hospitals across Japan. The largest group injured in this type of accident were children under age six. In response to these accidents, the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association, Inc. (JAMA) has set up certain voluntary standards, stating: “The amount of protrusion of the switch, its shape, and other relevant conditions should be considered carefully, and these should be designed and built to minimize erroneous operation.” Some automakers have developed mechanisms to prevent such power window accidents. In one type, when an object is caught between the window glass and frame, the window glass reverses its movement, and opens further.

JCIC decided to investigate the amount of force applied when closing a power window and the time involved in mainly family-type passenger cars sold in large numbers, and provide

consumers with any hazardous characteristics and points requiring user attention.

[Results of the investigation]

The results of our investigation ,including monitor tests, on 11 makes of domestic passenger cars (with engine sizes ranging from 660 to 2,000cc), and one imported model (for reference purposes) are presented below.

- [1] There are significant differences in the strength of the force exerted by the closing power window, ranging from 15.3 to 51.3 kgf.
- [2] There were cases when the closing power window (closing force of 30.1 kgf) could not be stopped with the strength of an average woman.
- [3] Of the 20 monitors, 18 felt that the closing force of the power window (30.1 kgf) was dangerous.
- [4] The power windows closed completely in 2.0 to 3.8 seconds.
- [5] With regard to models that had a mechanism to prevent something getting caught by the closing power window, some of them had the mechanism installed only at the driver's seat window, while others had the mechanism at all seat windows. For the models that had it only for the driver's seat, the mechanism was effective when closing the window with "one-touch operation," but it did not function when the window switch was continually pressed. In contrast, for models that had it for all seats, the preventive mechanism functioned regardless of whether the "one-touch operation" was used or not.
- [6] The preventive mechanism on some cars did not function properly when an object smaller than 1cm, such as an infant's finger was, caught in the power window, just before it was completely closed.

[Problems]

Because a fairly strong force is used in closing the power windows, and the varied installation and function of the preventive mechanism in the present situation, JCIC recommends that it is necessary, from the standpoint of preventing power window accidents, to adopt further measures, such as reduction of the force used in closing the power window, and adoption of a safety mechanism to prevent accidents for all power windows.

On April 6 of this year, JCIC submitted a request to the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association to devise and implement structural improvements in power windows, and to reexamine and make improvements in the safety mechanisms.

JCIC also advised consumers to exercise a greater care and attention when using power windows, including the following points: [1] When you drive with children, lock the power windows. [2] When you leave the car, make sure to remove the ignition key, and take the children with you.

. Water purifier sales scheme using a questionnaire increasing rapidly !

Some consumers have been visited by a salesperson asking to fill out a questionnaire. After they invited the salesperson in, they found that their true purpose was to sell a water purifier and/or water purifier cartridge, and they ended up signing a purchase contract. Such complaints and counseling cases have been increasing dramatically in recent years. This sales scheme involves the salesperson using a questionnaire to allay the consumers' concerns and gain entry to the home, when the actual motive is to sell the products. Consumers should be very careful not to fall victim to such sales tactics.

[Number of counseling cases]

From fiscal year 1995 to June 21, 1999, a total of 1,394 cases were received by consumer centers across Japan and JCIC, and they have been input into the PIO-NET (Practical Living Information Online Network System). When we looked at the number of such counseling cases for each fiscal year, there were less than 100 cases per year up to fiscal year 1996, but the number has been growing rapidly, reaching 944 cases in FY1998. The contract amount was about ¥297,000, with about ¥27,000 already paid, on average.

[Typical counseling cases]

A salesperson visits the consumer's home asking him or her to answer a questionnaire. The content of the questionnaire is fairly wide-ranging, including "purifiers," "city tap water," "garbage problem," "environment," "cellular telephones," and so on. When requesting the consumer to cooperate with the questionnaire, the salesperson tells the consumer that "we will give you a water purifier as a token of our thanks for answering the questionnaire," "you can win a water purifier in a lottery," and so on. In some cases, the consumer is told that "he or she will get either a water purifier or a cellular telephone as a present."

In some cases, the consumer just receives the questionnaire form at first. At that point, some consumers contact a consumer center with questions such as: "Is there a risk that my private information may be misused?" "Could I be forced to purchase the water purifier?" and so on. Later, the salesperson calls up and says "I want to visit you again and give you your water purifier present," and some consumers call a consumer center, saying, "I don't need it. (Or, I want to refuse it.) What should I do?" In other cases, the consumer responds to a questionnaire over the telephone, which is followed later by the salesperson's visit.

(2) As the consumer listens to the salesperson's talk after finishing the questionnaire, the situation may develop as follows:

[1] The consumer is induced to sign a contract to purchase the water purifier. Even though the consumer was supposed to receive a water purifier as a present, free of charge, she is

induced to sign a contract to purchase another, more expensive water purifier in some cases.

- [2] While a water purifier may in fact be given as a free gift, the consumer is talked into signing a long-term contract for replacement water purifier cartridges. In one case, for example, the consumer was coerced into signing a credit contract for a seven-year supply of filter cartridges (at only ¥2,700 per month), which totaled ¥440,000.

[Advice to consumers]

- (1) It is best not to trust any salesperson who visits with the pretext of a questionnaire, and yet goes on to try to sell a water purifier, etc., which was not in their initially stated purpose. Even if you are urged to buy a water purifier or cartridge after answering a questionnaire, say "No" and refuse clearly, if you do not want it. Also, be careful not to be persuaded easily by the sales pitch even if you are supposed to get a free gift.
- (2) Even if you sign a contract to purchase a water purifier or water purifier cartridges in door-to-door sales, you can still cancel the contract during the 8-day cooling off period from the day you signed a legally valid written contract. Even after the cooling-off period, if there was any problem in the sales method, you should contact your nearest consumer center.

Shinpei Nukaya Becomes New JCIC President.

On July 5, after 8 years of service Shogo Oikawa resigned from his position as President of JCIC. Mr. Oikawa has now taken up his new post as Adviser to the Japan Consumer Information Center. Shinpei Nukaya succeeded him as president. Mr. Nukaya formerly served as Administrative Vice-Minister of the Economic Planning Agency.