

Why GAO Did This Study

In the wake of increased product recalls in 2007-2008, Congress passed the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act of 2008 (CPSIA). Among other things, CPSIA requires the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to establish a database on the safety of consumer products that is publicly available, searchable, and accessible through the CPSC Web site. In response, CPSC launched SaferProducts.gov in March 2011. The Department of Defense and Full Year Continuing Appropriations Act of 2011 requires GAO to report on the data collected by CPSC in its safety information database. This report examines (1) the information required for submitting a report of harm to SaferProducts.gov, (2) the information used to identify the product and to allow CPSC to review manufacturer claims of material inaccuracy in a report of harm, and (3) the length of time CPSC takes to review a manufacturer's claim that a report contains materially inaccurate information. To do this work, GAO analyzed agency data, regulations, and CPSC program documentation and interviewed CPSC staff and various industry and consumer representatives.

What GAO Recommends

To effectively implement the recent amendments to CPSIA, GAO recommends that CPSC strengthen the analytic methods used to identify product information in a report of harm. CPSC agreed with GAO's recommendation. The minority commissioners also raised a number of concerns about the accuracy and usefulness of the new database.

View [GAO-12-30](#) or key components. For more information, contact Alicia Puente Cackley at (202) 512-8678 or cackleya@gao.gov.

CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY COMMISSION

Action Needed to Strengthen Identification of Potentially Unsafe Products

What GAO Found

To be eligible for publication on SaferProducts.gov, reports of harm involving a consumer product must contain several types of information, such as descriptions of the product and the associated harm. Reports may be submitted by consumers, government agencies, and health care professionals, among others. GAO's analysis of CPSC data as of July 7, 2011, showed that 38 percent of the 5,464 reports submitted to CPSC contained information that CPSIA requires for publication. Of these reports, 1,847 were published on SaferProducts.gov. Although not required, many submitters appear to have firsthand knowledge of the product—37 percent of published reports stated that the submitter was also the victim, and 24 percent stated that the victim was the child, spouse, parent, or other relative of the submitter. Also, most submitters provided their optional consent for CPSC to release their contact information to the manufacturer.

Numeric information, such as a model number or serial number, can be helpful in identifying potentially unsafe products. However, this information is optional rather than required in a report of harm. Instead, submitters must only include a word or phrase sufficient to distinguish the product as one within CPSC's jurisdiction. All manufacturers we spoke with considered the required information insufficient for identifying products in a report of harm. On August 12, 2011, a new law was signed containing a requirement for CPSC to attempt to obtain the model number or serial number, or a photograph of the product, from submitters who did not provide this information in a report of harm. To meet this requirement, CPSC must identify all reports of harm that do not contain either a model number or a serial number. However, CPSC does not currently analyze its data to identify reports of harm that contain this numeric information. Instead, its method of analysis combines numeric identifiers—model numbers or serial numbers—and less precise text entries, such as product descriptions or names. Furthermore, some submitters include model numbers and serial numbers in other database fields that CPSC does not include in its analysis. Unless CPSC strengthens its analytic methods to identify model numbers or serial numbers in a report of harm, it will likely not be able to identify all reports that require the agency to contact the submitter for more product information because it does not track all reports of harm missing such information.

Prior to recent amendments to CPSIA, CPSC had 10 business days from its transmission of a report to the manufacturer in which to publish a report of harm (after the amendments, CPSC has up to 5 additional business days to publish a report when a claim of materially inaccurate information is made or when a report does not contain a model number or serial number). Most reports to which manufacturers responded that were published met the 10-day time frame. Of the 1,085 published reports of harm to which companies responded, 1,020 (94 percent) were published within 10 business days after CPSC notified the company that the report had been submitted. CPSC published 160 reports with claims of materially inaccurate information, and, of these reports, most were resolved and published within 10 business days. CPSC plans to conduct outreach to increase the number of manufacturers registered to receive electronic notifications to yield a more rapid response to its notifications.