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The Mother of All Furniture Recalls

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IKEA, the world's largest furniture retailer, recently issued the largest and most extraordinary furniture recall in North American history.

The massive recall - 29 million chests and dressers in the United States and another 6.6 million units in Canada - was triggered by a February 2016 incident in which a 22-month-old boy was killed when a six-drawer dresser toppled over on him. Two other children were killed in separate tip-over incidents involving IKEA MALM dressers that were reported to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) in 2014. Even when using just the lowest of the \$70 to \$200 retail price range for the six products included in the IKEA recall multiplies to more than \$2 billion worth of impacted furniture for the U.S. alone.

In addition to its sheer massiveness, the recall is made all the more extraordinary by the stipulations set forth in IKEA's remediation agreement with CPSC. Not only is IKEA offering customers a choice of their money back or a free anchor kit, the Sweden-based company has agreed to the unusual step of going to the customer's home to pick up the furniture or to install the furniture wall anchor at no cost.

The IKEA recall is also veiled in intrigue as an unidentified CPSC staffer prematurely leaked the recall to the Philadelphia Inquirer. The Inquirer broke the story in advance of a timed joint announcement by CPSC and IKEA about the voluntary recall.

Consumer Matters opined that the press leak created a "nightmare scenario" for IKEA and its legal counsel. "After the Inquirer article was published, multiple other media outlets began reporting the recall," Consumer Matters wrote. "This likely put IKEA (and the CPSC) in an incredibly difficult situation of having to quickly make decisions about the release of information about the recall."

CPSC said the recalled children's and adult chests and dressers, ranging from three to six drawers, do not comply with the performance requirements of the U.S. voluntary industry standard (ASTM F2057-14). The products, made with particleboard and fiberboard, were sold between 2002 and June 2016. "The recalled chests and dressers are unstable if they are not properly anchored to the wall, posing a serious tip-over and entrapment hazard that can result in death or serious injuries to children," CPSC stated in its recall notice.

IKEA actually announced an anchor repair kit program in July 2015 in response to the deaths of the two toddlers in 2014. In addition to the three fatalities, IKEA has fielded reports of 41 other tip-over incidents resulting in 17 injuries to children between 19 months and 10 years old. The recall announcement does not specify where the products were made. IKEA has plants throughout the world, including a huge manufacturing facility in Danville, VA. The company also contracts other manufacturers to make its products.

This was not the first, but was by far the biggest recall related to tip-over hazards, an issue that CPSC has been seeking to address for far more than a decade. Two of the more notable CPSC tip-over actions include Sauder Woodworking's 2012 recall of 592,000 TV carts and stands after a 19-month-girl died and Ameriwood, which recalled 138,000 entertainment centers in 2007, following a child's death.

Two of the most notorious and ongoing wood furniture recalls by CPSC, also tied to children's deaths, include cedar chests and drop-side cribs.

On May 17, Lane Company of Altavista, VA, re-announced "a renewed search for cedar chests to replace their locks." Proof that recalls have no statute of limitations, Lane first issued its recall in 1996 for 12 million Lane and Virginia Maid chests manufactured between 1912 and 1987 following the suffocation deaths of six children who were entrapped in the chests. More recently Lane learned of another child's suffocation and two other near fatalities. Lane is offering consumers a free lock that will prevent entrapments because they don't automatically latch shut when the lid is closed. In December 2010, the CPSC outlawed wood drop-side cribs. The ban came on the heels of 32 reports of children's deaths and the recall of more than 11 million cribs by more than a dozen domestic manufacturers and importers.

CPSC Chairman Elliott Kaye issued a stern warning to furniture manufacturers to design and make safer products or else. "(IKEA) made an important commitment to us and the American public to sell in the U.S. only dressers that comply with the most up-to-date performance standards for furniture stability," Kaye said. "I fully expect all furniture companies to do the same. Those failing to do so should pay close attention to the details of this recall, as they should expect to be hearing from us. CPSC will seek recalls of other brands that pose an unreasonable tip-over risk to innocent children."