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More than 200 stores in 31 states pulled tubs of Mini Fruity Gels off shelves because of safety concerns.



## Cover story

By Leslie Smith Jr., USA TODAY

# Gel candies 'like rubber stoppers' linked to deaths

## Consumer calls prompted action at one major chain

By Gary Strauss  
USA TODAY

Michelle Enrile's life essentially ended April 10, 1999, when she fell into a coma after allegedly swallowing a popular gel-like candy made by Taiwan-based Sheng Hsiang Jen Foods.

Unable to breathe for nearly 30 minutes after collapsing in her San Jose, Calif., home, the fourth-grader sustained brain damage from which there was virtually no chance of recovery, says her physician, Elaine Pico. Three weeks ago on July 30, Gil and Yvonne Enrile awoke to find that their daughter, 12 years old by then, had died.

"Even though everyone told us she would never recover, we still had high hopes that she'd come back to us as a normal kid," says Gil Enrile, a 48-year-



**Little girl lost:** Michelle Enrile went into a coma on April 10, 1999. She died July 30 of this year.

old engineer at semiconductor equipment maker Applied Materials. "All this over a piece of candy. It's like

bringing a gun into your house and not knowing when it will go off. We're still in shock."

Long popular in Asian countries, the gel candy has been removed in recent days from store shelves of three major U.S. retail chains — Safeway, Albertson's and Costco — in at least 31 states, Mexico and the United Kingdom.

The candies are marketed under a

### ► Deaths prompt retailers to remove gel candy from shelves, 1A

variety of brand names, including Fruit Poppers, Jelly Yum and Mini Fruity Gels. The candies also have been linked to last year's choking deaths of 3-year-old Deven Joncich of Morgan Hill, Calif., and Arturo Lopez, a Seattle 2-year-old. A Canadian girl, whose name has not been made public, also died last year.

The jellies, which until last year were sold primarily in small Asian and

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# Choking deaths cited in Japan as early as 1995

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Hispanic markets in the USA, come in colorful foil-top plastic cups about the size of coffee creamer packs. Sheng Hsiang has said it has sold more than 3 billion of the snacks.

Attorneys representing Sheng Hsiang say Michelle couldn't have choked from a gel candy because physicians never found one lodged in her throat. Attorney Gary Soter has said that Michelle choked while being chased by her younger sister. "Any food product could cause a person to choke under those circumstances," he said.

## Troubled history

The candies are made from konjac jelly, which comes from the fibrous Asian elephant yam plant. Billed in Pacific Rim countries as a health product, the candies are shaped and sized like the end of a hot dog. But health officials say the candy's rubberlike consistency doesn't easily dissolve, and can be almost impossible to dislodge if swallowed whole by small children.

The product is described on the Web site of U.S. distributor New Choice Food as a healthy alternative to candy — fat free, cholesterol free and high in fiber. The 120-count tubs that were sold through Costco carry a 1-inch-by-1½ inch label warning of a choking hazard. The warning reads: "Do not try to swallow whole! Take only in small bites and must be chewed carefully. Not suitable for children under 5."

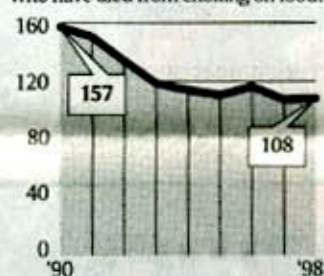
The gel candies have had a troubled history, particularly in Japan, where they've been dubbed "the deadly mouthful" after being linked to 8 deaths and 80 choking incidents since 1995. But it wasn't until Michelle Enrile's death that much U.S. publicity surrounding the death surfaced — even in northern California. Attorneys for Sheng Hsiang maintain the product is safe. "Whether it was a mini-fruity gel, a piece of meat, a hot dog, or any hard candy, the result could have been the same," the company said in an earlier statement.

But Food and Drug Administration official Janice Oliver said Thursday that the agency has begun collecting samples from several manufacturers to decide whether the government should ask for a permanent ban from the nation's shelves. The Consumer Product Safety Commission says it has no jurisdiction to recall food.

Albertson's, Safeway and warehouse retailer Costco — who say

## Choking deaths

Children age 1 day through 14 years who have died from choking on food:



Source: CDC's National Center for Health Statistics

By Julie Snyder, USA TODAY

"All this over a piece of candy. It's like bringing a gun into your house and not knowing when it will go off. We're still in shock."

— Gil Enrile, father of Michelle Enrile, who died July 30 after being in a coma for more than a year

they were unaware of choking incidents in Japan as well as at least two deaths in Taiwan — are taking no chances.

After ordering gel candy products to be removed from nearly 200 outlets in California — the biggest U.S. market for gel candies — Albertson's expanded its recall Thursday to 1,700 stores in 31 states, including Tennessee's Sessel's chain and Philadelphia-area Acme stores.

"Safety and health of our customers are our first concern," says spokeswoman Jenny Enochson. "We felt the right thing to do was to get it off the shelves."

Safeway began stocking the candies only within the past few months, says corporate spokesman Brian Dowling. "Everybody and their brother has been carrying it, so obviously our buyer saw some potential interest for consumer appeal," he says. News of Michelle's death generated enough calls from consumers to prompt Safeway to pull the product, something it rarely does without prompting from a manufacturer or government regulators, Dowling says.

Mom-and-pop store operators also are responding.

"We're trying not to sell them any more, because they're not good to sell," says John Truong, manager at Hai Thanh Supermarket in San Jose. "I didn't order any

more. They were popular, really popular. Everybody buys them."

## Warnings

Following Arturo Lopez's death in July 2000, Dr. Alonzo Plough, Seattle's director of public health, issued the nation's first health alert, warning parents of potential hazards. "We don't think they're a safe product, and there should be some serious thought to regulatory action," Plough said Thursday.

"You can pound on these products, and they keep their form. They don't dissolve easily, and they don't break up," Plough says. "They can lodge in the windpipe because of their shape."

Canada's version of the FDA, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, issued a similar alert last August after consumer advocates in Hong Kong reported the two Taiwanese deaths. Besides the choking death of a 4-year-old Toronto girl, a 10-year-old boy almost died until he was revived by family members, says CFIA inspector Chris Tang. The candies are "like rubber stoppers," Tang says.

The Santa Clara County, Calif., Department of Public Health recommends that the candy be cut in pieces before it's given to small children.

"We decided to do something after the death of Michelle on July 30 and after learning of another death in Seattle," said Joy Alexiou of the county Health Department. "We want to make sure parents read those warning labels."

Terry O'Reilly, a San Mateo, Calif., attorney representing the Enriles, plans to file suit against Sheng Hsiang on behalf of the Joncich family next week.

"We've heard rumors of several other deaths in California," O'Reilly says.

O'Reilly, who has been handling product-liability cases for 32 years, says, "I'd like to get this product off the shelves. It's dangerous, and it's going to keep killing kids. There's no excuse for this."

Sheng Hsiang's U.S. distributor, New Choice Food of Irwindale, Calif., and Marina Foods, the San Jose grocery where the Enriles purchased the gel candies, have already agreed to pay the family a total of about \$7 million. A trial date involving the Enrile's case against Sheng Hsiang is expected to be set within the next 2 weeks.

New Choice and Marina Foods declined to comment for this story.

Gil Enrile says no amount of money can assuage the pain of his daughter's death — nor his guilt.

"She was a perfect kid," says Enrile, barely keeping his composure. "She was very organized and a straight-A student. She liked to ride

bikes. She liked to swim. Her wish was to go to Stanford University. Losing her is going to be with us for a long time."

He still blames himself for being unable to dislodge the candy from Michelle's throat. If there's one thing he hopes her death accomplishes, it's to see the candies permanently removed from store shelves. "Nobody should go what we have gone through," Enrile says.