



If you witness, or suspect, your child has swallowed a button battery, bring him or her to the emergency room right away, said Dr. Jon Raymond, Grand Forks emergency room physician. Nationwide, about 2,000 such cases are treated in emergency rooms each year.

Health professionals advise parents to protect kids from coin-size lithium batteries, especially in Christmas toys

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Button batteries are everywhere these days, powering many of the electronic gadgets we rely on. But most people don't realize the potential threat they pose to young children who may swallow them, health care professionals say.

Coin-size lithium batteries can be found in products such as book lights, small calculators, flameless candles, mini remote control devices, kitchen and bathroom scales, watches, key fobs, musical greeting cards, books that "talk" or make sounds and other electronics.

If a child swallows one of these batteries, it can get stuck in the throat and cause internal injury, said Dr. Jon Raymond, emergency room physician at Altru Health System in Grand Forks.

"If it's lodged in the esophagus, it starts to erode — and the erosion can cause a perforation," he said. The ability to create a perforation, or hole, "is unique to these batteries."

The hole is caused when the battery sticks in one place and leaks lithium, a chemical substance which burns into the wall of the throat.

If an X-ray reveals that the battery has gotten stuck in the esophagus and is causing an obstruction, "it probably has to come out," Raymond said. "That's truly an emergency."

"If it causes an esophageal injury, the child would be very sick."

The situation may require that a physician place a tube down the throat "to grab it and pull it out," he said. The procedure should be done within a few hours of ingestion.

In some cases, emergency surgery would be needed to repair the hole, followed by treatment with antibiotics.

'Not uncommon'

Incidents of kids having swallowed button batteries are "not uncommon" among the cases of foreign-body ingestions that Raymond said he and his emergency room colleagues typically see.

"Kids who are ages 1 to 6 make up 80 percent of those cases that we see, he said. "Kids put things in their nose and ears all the time."

If you know your child has ingested a button battery — or if you're unsure but suspect it — take the child to the emergency room right away, he advised.

If the child is choking or is fussing, “it could be that they’ve swallowed a battery.”

The X-ray may show the battery has moved past the esophagus.

“If the battery is found to be in the stomach or intestine, it’s sloshing around — not fixed in one spot,” Raymond said.

Doctors may decide to let it continue on course and take an X-ray every couple of days to see if the battery is moving along, he said.

“If it’s not moving or the child is sick or vomiting or has stomach pain, we may need to do something.”

About 3,500 children have died as a result of swallowing button batteries, said Carma Hanson, coordinator of Safe Kids Grand Forks, a division of Altru Health System.

At a recent professional conference, she heard the story of a child who had to undergo 33 surgeries as a result of swallowing a button battery, she said.

Smaller, stronger

The hand-held gadgets that contain these batteries “are getting smaller and smaller, and we’re asking them to do more and more things,” said Hanson.

“Kids oftentimes swallow a coin,” she said. “Because button batteries are similar in size, people think that it’s okay to just let it pass through.”

They don’t realize the potential danger of the “very very strong acid” the battery contains, Hanson said.

Children’s products — such as toys, games and storybooks that make sounds — are required under law to have a screw-type protective cover, she said.

But products for adults do not have to meet the same requirements, and “they are things that children have access to in the home.”

“Parents and caregivers need to be cognizant of what products they have in the home that kids have access to” and take steps to keep them out of children’s reach, she said.

“For example, digital thermometers. People often put them on a child’s changing table,” she said. But if the instrument is within a child’s reach, it could spell trouble.

More cases

Raymond is seeing more cases involving coin-size batteries, he said. “It’s probably due to all of the electronics we have now.”

Each year, about 2,000 cases are reported nationwide, he said. “That’s just the number of reported cases. The actual number is likely higher.”

The Altru ER does not track the number of these cases, he said, but he estimates that the ER staff sees a couple each year.

Especially at Christmastime, when “lots of toys are laying around on the floor,” parents should be watchful that kids don’t have access to coin-size batteries, he said.

“Choking is something we’re always worried about. Once we get them stable, from an airway point of view, we can see where (the object) is — and that guides (treatment decisions).”

“Because it’s metallic, a battery is really to see on an X-ray,” he said.

He’s also concerned about “the little tiny magnets, which — if a child swallows a pair — can get into the gastrointestinal tract,” he said.

“They can separate and, if they come together, they can pinch the bowel between them” which disrupts healthy function.

Parents unaware

As part of her role with Safe Kids Grand Forks, Hanson is working to raise public awareness about button batteries among parents throughout the area.

At a meeting with about 40 local parents this fall, she asked if any of them had heard about the issues associated with these batteries.



When a coin-size “button battery” gets stuck in a child’s throat -- as shown in this X-ray -- it can erode, causing a hole in the esophagus which requires immediate medical attention, said Dr. Jon Raymond, an emergency room physician in Grand Forks. Submitted photo

“Only two parents knew about the dangers of button batteries,” she said.

The shiny, tiny objects are attractive to kids who naturally explore their world by putting things in their mouths or who mistake them for candy.

“It’s not going to work to tell kids, ‘Don’t put things your mouth that Mommy didn’t give you,’ ” she said.

Not realizing the danger they pose, many parents might believe that it’s alright to wait for the battery to pass through the body, Hanson said.

But it’s important to seek medical care as soon as possible to determine if the battery was swallowed, if it has lodged in the body and if it should be removed.

In addition to toys, the holidays present the opportunity for guests to bring batteries into the home, she said.

Visitors may have battery-operated devices such garage or car door openers on key chains or small calculators in their purses which, if left at a low level, kids can easily access, she said.

“Always put guests’ purses up high where kids can’t access them.”

The danger posed to children by button batteries “is scary,” Hanson said. “People know about car seats or (the need to wear a) life jacket at the lake.”

But when it comes to coin-size batteries, “parents don’t know what they don’t know,” she said. “If you don’t know about them, you’re not going to take action.”
