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Peoria

Peoria family warns of hazards of button batteries

by **Jazmine Woodberry** - Aug. 7, 2011 12:00 AM
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Three days after Emmett Rauch swallowed a quarter-size battery, he was fighting for his life. Ten months later, the 22-month-old still struggles to stay out of the hospital.

In between doctor visits and surgeries, the toddler's family and staff at Phoenix Children's Hospital have mounted a campaign to save other children from his plight.

Button batteries, those thin silver discs, are used in all kinds of home electronics in our technology-driven world where everything is shrinking: watches, children's toys, remote controls.

Emmett's case is one of about 3,500 reported annually, according to the National Capital Poison Center.

The Washington, D.C., center issued a study earlier this year that said button-battery incidents resulting in severe injuries and death had increased sevenfold since 1985.

Emmett's case was the worst Michelle Chacon, a pediatric registered nurse in Phoenix, had seen. She called it a growing trend and estimated that Phoenix Children's Hospital sees about 10 cases each month.

Emmett remains in the hospital after his latest surgery. During one of his many stays, Chacon, the boy's primary nurse, sat at his bedside along with the boy's Peoria family. She and Emmett's mom, Karla Rauch, began talking about how "no other child should go through this," Chacon said.

The Rauch family noticed something wrong with Emmett last October, on the day they planned to celebrate his first birthday. He'd lost his appetite, coupled with a fever. His parents took him to urgent care.

The doctor sent him home with what he thought was a case of the flu.

Two days later, Emmett had worsened and began coughing up blood.

A chest X-ray showed a CR 2025 lithium button battery lodged in his esophagus. It likely came from a DVD remote, and Emmett had put it into his mouth, as babies do.

"We're lucky that he's even alive," Rauch said.

In many cases, such accidents go unreported as the batteries pass through the digestive system.

When one gets lodged in the throat, it can cause chemical burns in just two hours. The button battery in Emmett's throat stayed for three days.

If undiagnosed for that long, an ingested battery can cause severe damage or death, hospital officials said.

The battery acid burned a hole through the front of Emmett's esophagus and the back of his trachea.

"He was drowning because it burned a hole between the two and created that passageway. He stopped eating and drinking because his body was saying, 'Hey, wait a minute. This is going in the wrong spot,' " Chacon said.

Emmett's condition was critical. He spent time in the Phoenix Children's Pediatric Intensive Care Unit with numerous stays and surgeries.

Slow recuperation

On a recent summer day, Karla Rauch shared photos of Emmett's burned throat.

Nearby, the blond-haired toddler made ice-cream cones from Play-Doh. Mom kept watch, quick to retrieve the colorful dough when it went to his mouth.

Older brother Ethan, 3, pointed to one of the photos. "That's Doc's esophagus," he said, using his nickname for Emmett. "It's light and then it gets dark."

Emmett had made progress last spring and began eating solid foods. But still-vulnerable tissue in his throat tore again.

Emmett recently underwent more surgery to help fix that dark spot in his throat. Dr. Craig Egan used the boy's stomach tissue to rebuild his esophagus.

Medical professionals say Emmett's case has been especially severe. He remains hospitalized as a small leak in his throat is monitored.

His doctor hopes Emmett can return home soon and get rid of the feeding tube in his stomach within the upcoming year.

"We're just hoping to get him back to normal life as soon as possible," Egan said.

Recovery to action

During one of the family's many visits to the hospital, they saw another family faced with a similar situation.

It wasn't just Emmett struggling through this, they thought, and that made them all the more determined to do something.

In the hopes of creating a non-profit, Rauch began journaling about the ordeal at emmettsfight.com and began working with Chacon and Phoenix Children's Hospital to increase awareness among doctors nationally.

"We want this to stop, and we want to educate parents," Rauch said.

The young mother said that allowing others to learn from Emmett's experience helps her cope with the surgeries, the stacks of X-rays and too many trips to the ICU.

The Phoenix Children's Hospital website offers information on choking and poisoning prevention and what to do if a button battery is swallowed. They are holding off on including Emmett's whole story "until there's a happy ending," Rauch said.

Injury-prevention specialist Erika Gomez at Phoenix Children's Hospital said it's not likely that homes can get rid of all of the small batteries. However, she suggested buying products that take tools to open and reinforcing devices with duct tape.

"It's not pretty, but it's creating a barrier so that children will leave it alone," she said.

The backs of remote-control devices around the Rauch home now carry that less-than-pretty prevention. It's a constant reminder of what the family has gone through, and what they hope Emmett can inspire: greater awareness.

"I honestly believe that he's going to go through this for everybody else so that we can create this national awareness and stop this from happening to other kids," his nurse said. "He's going to survive this, and he's going to make this movement happen."

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