

# Remote Controls Aren't Toys: Lithium Batteries Prove Deadly to Kids

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By Bonnie Rochman

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For something so small, the quarter-sized remote control battery that 1-year-old Emmett Rauch swallowed a year ago has caused big problems. Emmett has spent 19 weeks in a hospital ICU. He's had 14 surgeries and been subjected to general anesthesia 21 times.

On Tuesday, he was in the hospital again due to battery-related lung complications, but his mother, Karla Rauch, took a moment to speak about what he's endured because she'd like to spare other families the same sort of suffering. "Our goal is to help save lives," says Rauch, who lives in Phoenix.

Rauch shared her story as battery-maker Energizer and Safe Kids USA, which works to prevent unintentional childhood injury, are teaming up to raise awareness about the hazards of button batteries. "The Battery Controlled" campaign kicks off today with the requisite Facebook and Twitter sites, where officials will simultaneously spread the word about the perils of little kids swallowing batteries and urge electronics manufacturers to better secure battery compartments on devices including remotes, keyless-entry key fobs, singing greeting cards, calculators and bathroom scales. There's also a sobering video.

In 2010, more than 3,400 children swallowed lithium batteries; two died and 19 had serious complications such as a perforated aorta, according to Dr. Toby Litovitz, executive and medical director of the National Capital Poison Center, which oversees the National Battery Ingestion Center. The number of critical injuries has quadrupled in the past five years, probably because the 20-millimeter lithium cell batteries have gotten bigger — the size of a nickel rather than a large pencil eraser — and pack a higher voltage. "Kids have been swallowing batteries for decades, but these are much more hazardous," says Litovitz. "That's why there's all this fuss at the moment."

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There's little babies love as much as pushing buttons, and many parents — guilty as charged — have let their children play with remote controls or key fobs. In the same way that kids often prefer the packaging to the present, 58% of parents surveyed by Energizer and Safe Kids said their children like adult electronic devices more than their little-kid toys.

But whereas children's toys regularly have child-resistant battery compartments that usually require a screwdriver for access, devices not intended for kids often have pop-off doors that are easy to open or fall off when dropped. Parents don't realize they shouldn't be letting their children play with those gadgets; survey results indicated that 66% of moms and dads hadn't

heard about the dangers of button batteries. “Parents don’t know this is an issue,” says Stacey Harbour, director of marketing at Energizer, which intends to make its packaging more child-resistant and include label warnings by 2012.

Once the lithium batteries are swallowed, saliva triggers an electrical current that releases a chemical reaction that can scorch the esophagus and damage vocal chords; the chemical reactions can continue once the batteries are removed. Feeding tubes are often required, and corrective surgeries are not always successful.

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To avoid debilitating outcomes, the buttons must be removed within two hours. But many parents, like Rauch, aren’t even aware that their child has swallowed a battery. When Emmett spiked a fever last October, shortly after his first birthday, it was chalked up to the flu. Days later after he refused to eat or move, his pediatrician sent him to the emergency room for a chest X-ray. “The radiologist could read the serial number on the battery,” says Rauch.

He was rushed to Phoenix Children’s Hospital, where he was put on life support. The battery had burned holes in his esophagus and trachea; a year later he is still fed through a feeding tube and will be for the foreseeable future.

“Our trauma surgeon told us that they see 10 ingestions a month,” says Rauch.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t really think twice about him playing with the remote control.”