

Parents warned over ‘button battery’ dangers

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A battery the size of a button can cause significant and potentially fatal injuries in as little as two hours, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and Safekids New Zealand are today warning.

Button batteries are coin-sized batteries common in a wide variety of devices including remote controls, singing Christmas cards, bathroom scales and car keys.

“When a button battery comes into contact with bodily fluids it creates an electrical current. If swallowed or ingested these batteries can cause burns and tissue damage in as little as two hours,” says Ministry of Consumer Affairs Principal Advisor Martin Rushton.

“This little-known threat in our homes can cause serious and sometimes permanent injuries that require multiple, painful surgeries to repair. In some cases it can prove fatal.”

Overseas evidence shows that button batteries are an emerging risk, as they are found in an increasing range of devices and new lithium ion types are much more powerful. In the United States, more than 19 children sustained life-threatening or debilitating injuries last year. The Ministry is aware of at least four cases of injury in New Zealand, though less serious incidents are likely to be underreported.

The elderly may also be at risk, with overseas reports of button batteries – also used in hearing aids – being mistaken for pills and tablets.

The Ministry is working with counterparts in the United States, Australia, Japan and South Korea to look at longer term measures that could reduce the risks from button batteries, says Mr Rushton.

“However with many batteries and devices already in circulation, the best approach is to alert parents and other caregivers of the risk.

“We urge parents to check your home, car and any other place your child goes for gadgets that may contain button batteries. Make sure these batteries are securely enclosed in the device and keep any spare button batteries locked away.”

Safekids Director Ann Weaver says button batteries should be treated like other potentially dangerous items.

“Young children explore the world by putting objects in their mouth, ears and nose, so just like you wouldn’t leave sharp objects or medicine lying out, make sure you secure and lock away your button batteries.

“Kids can still breathe if a button battery is lodged in their throat or nose, so it may not be obvious at first that something is wrong.

“If you suspect that your child has swallowed or ingested a battery, take them to the hospital immediately. Do not let your child eat or drink anything and do not attempt to induce vomiting.”

ENDS