

How to keep children safe from button batteries

 mlive.com/health/2011/12/how_to_keep_children_safe_from.html

December 12, 2011

Help fund crucial watchdog journalism. Subscribe to MLive.com.

By Sue Thoms | sthoms1@mlive.com



Emily Zoladz | The Grand Rapids PressMedical emergency: Virginia Van Steenhuyse, of Grand Rapids, had to take her son, Joe, 3, to Saint Mary's Urgent Care after he swallowed the battery to their DVD remote control when he was 14 months old. A scope was used to dislodge the battery from his esophagus.

Amid the wrappings and trappings of the holiday season lurks a dangerous, even deadly, hazard for children.

It arrives in gifts. It appears in decorations. And it is easily accessed by toddlers with nimble fingers and curious minds.

The danger: the button battery that powers toys, remote-control devices and musical greeting cards.

The batteries are about the same size as coins, and just as easy to swallow. But they have the potential to cause far more damage. They easily become lodged in the esophagus, where they set off an electrical current that burns into the flesh.

"We have had two in the last couple of years who had such severe burns, they eroded a hole through their esophagus and into their trachea," said Dr. Jim DeCou, a pediatric surgeon at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital.

When there is a hole in the trachea, food or liquids can get into the airway, causing coughing and wheezing.

The batteries also are capable of eroding through the trachea into large blood vessels, which can lead to bleeding or death.

If parents have any suspicion that a child may have swallowed a button battery, they should take immediate action, said Jennifer Hoekstra, Safe Kids coordinator for Spectrum Health.

“If a child ingests one of these batteries, it is not time to pick up the phone to call your doctor. Take them to the emergency room immediately,” she said. “The burning of the esophagus happens in two hours.”

The problem of swallowed batteries is “not very common,” DeCou said. “But it’s becoming more common just because you find these things in so many devices.”

The number of cases resulting in serious injury or death has quadrupled in the past five years, according to Battery Controlled, an advocacy effort by Energizer and Safe Kids USA.



Emily Zoladz | The Grand Rapids Press
In the house: Button batteries are found in common household items such as remote controls.

More than 3,400 cases of battery ingestion were reported in 2010 in the U.S., resulting in 19 serious injuries and in some cases, death.

It is often difficult to tell that a child has swallowed a battery — which is one reason they can cause so much damage.

Virginia Van Steenhuyse, a Grandville mother of five, knows that all too well. When her youngest son, Joe, was 14 months old, he pried the back off the DVD remote and popped the tiny, lithium battery in his mouth. Like most kids who swallow a battery, he did it when no one was looking.

That evening, Joe appeared to be coming down with the flu. He was cranky. He tried to vomit. He didn't want to eat, although he would drink liquids.

Van Steenhuyse noticed the battery was missing from the remote, but she didn't think he swallowed it. There had been no signs of choking or difficulty breathing. However, when it became apparent Joe could not swallow food, she brought him into an urgent care center at Saint Mary's Health Center.

An X-ray revealed the battery lodged in her son's esophagus. He was taken by ambulance to Helen DeVos Children's Hospital, where a doctor removed the battery with a scope while Joe was under general anesthesia.

Fortunately, the battery only irritated the esophagus — it did not tear a hole in it.

"We were very blessed he didn't have that," his mother said.

Joe, now 3, is a healthy, active boy with no long-term consequences from the incident.

His mother, however, likely will never forget that day.

TIPS

Safety Steps when dealing with button batteries

Keep devices with button batteries out of reach of children — just as you would with cleaning products and chemicals.

If you suspect a child has ingested a battery, take him or her to the emergency room immediately. Damage to the esophagus can occur within two hours.

Symptoms:

The initial symptoms of a child who has swallowed a small lithium battery are similar to a cold or a flu.

- discomfort and crankiness
- lack of interest in eating
- sometimes unwilling to drink liquids
- sometimes coughing or wheezing

Devices that might contain these batteries:

- Musical greeting cards
- Recordable storybooks
- Keyless remotes for cars
- Bathroom scales
- Calculators
- Watches
- Flameless candles

Sources: Helen DeVos Children's Hospital, Safe Kids Program

"I felt horrible, like I had been a negligent parent," Van Steenhuyse said. "It was pretty much the worst night of my life."

That is why she wants to share her story: to raise awareness about the dangers the batteries pose and prevent injuries in other children.

Raising awareness is crucial, said Hoekstra, of the Safe Kids Program. Although she is an injury prevention specialist and a mother of four children, she was unaware of the issue until she learned about it at a national Safe Kids conference in early November.

"It's crazy — it's so dangerous," she said. She came away thinking, "I have to tell everyone I know. If I didn't know, how can I expect everyday moms to know?"

Child-proofing is required for toys with batteries. They must be in cases that can only be opened with a screwdriver. But there is no such requirement for devices for adults and teens, said Dr. Kris Jatana, of Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

And most homes contain dozens of such items that are in easy reach of children: musical greeting cards, keyless remotes for cars, bathroom scales, calculators and watches.

Jatana served on an expert panel in March advising the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission about button batteries. Since then, federal legislation has been introduced calling for higher product safety standards and increased warning labels for devices containing the batteries.

Jatana supports the legislation, but he also advises parents to take preventive steps in their homes.

"They can really go through the house top to bottom and look for any electronic devices and see how easy it is for a child to obtain access to it," he said. "They should be kept out of reach of children."

"When buying toys and gifts for the holidays, consumers should be aware that these (batteries) are out there and they can be a danger to children."

Small objects have always posed a danger to children. DeCou, the surgeon at DeVos Children's Hospital, said he has retrieved a variety of swallowed items: safety pins, Barbie doll shoes, pendants, little tree branches, pieces of glass and nails.

Ages 2 to 3 are the peak years, but even older children are at risk. He sees kids who pop a coin in their mouth while playing around and accidentally swallow it.

Because of the dangers of button batteries, he advised parents to be especially vigilant about keeping them out of reach.

"If they find an open remote control and the battery is not found, they need to look at the child," he said. "If they suspect anything, they need to come in."

E-mail Sue Thoms: sthoms@grpress.com

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.