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Make the holidays safer for children

By DR. NIRAV PATEL, Ask Children's Hospital
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Christmas decorations are shown. From glass decor to holiday plants to tiny batteries in small gifts, all can be hazards to children -- and pets -- during the holidays.

ILLUSTRATION

The holiday season puts your child in a new environment - especially when visiting friends and relatives. In this new environment, your child may be exposed to potentially harmful things that you would not normally think about. Young toddlers are particularly curious and should be watched carefully.

A number of holiday plants and berries are highly toxic and could harm children or pets. Decorative plants with berries, such as mistletoe and holly, are of particular concern because the berries could fall from the plant and be eaten by a child. Mistletoe berries could cause stomach upset and also be choking hazards. Holly berries could cause vomiting and stomach disturbances, and have been attributed to at least one death of a toddler that is believed to have eaten 20 to 30 holly berries.

Adults should be very careful to pick up fallen mistletoe berries and holly berries, and should keep these holiday plants far from the reach of children. Please be aware of these dangers to children if planning to give these plants as gifts during the holiday season.

While pine cones are not poisonous, they could pose a choking hazard for a child. Christmas tree needles are not toxic, but could be a choking hazard. Tree water additives used to preserve a fresh tree could contain aspirin or bleach, which could harm a child if ingested.

If you choose to use candles during the holidays, be aware that the lamp oil in decorative oil candles is extremely dangerous and could be fatal to a child. To a toddler, oil candles may look like bottles of juice, soda or water. It only takes seconds for a child to ingest a fatal amount. Keep lamp oil and oil candles out of the reach of children or do not use them at all.

Another potentially dangerous item is the small disc battery commonly used in electronics, watches, toys and hearing aids. The batteries (about the size of a button) could be swallowed by a child. These batteries contain corrosive alkali and may contain life-threatening quantities of mercury. They can burn or puncture the esophagus within the course of a few hours and even be fatal. If you know a child has swallowed a battery of any type, seek medical attention immediately. Symptoms and complications include abdominal pain and tenderness, constipation, vomiting and fever.

Use a cardboard toilet paper roll to test small items that could be choke hazards. To see if a toy is potentially dangerous because of its size, place it - without compressing it - into the tube. If the object fits entirely within the tube in any fashion, do not give the item to a child under the age of three or to any child who still puts items in the mouth.

Warning signs of ingesting a foreign object include gagging, drooling and sometimes coughing. A swallowed object can close your child's air passage.

Other concerns during the gift-giving and party season are:

- Alcoholic drinks left sitting out after a party. These could harm a child if ingested, and it only takes a small amount to cause alcohol poisoning in a child's tiny body.
 - Colognes and perfumes left sitting under the tree. These contain alcohol and should be placed out of reach.
 - Be certain that any anti-freeze stored in your garage is kept in a locked cabinet. Anti-freeze tends to be visually attractive to children and, unfortunately, the taste also appeals to children. Ingestion could cause kidney failure and may be fatal.
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If your child has swallowed a foreign object or substance:

- Use the Heimlich maneuver if the child is choking and turning blue. Call 911 immediately.
 - If initial choking distress has passed, contact your pediatrician for instructions.
 - Observe the child closely. A coin or object can be lodged in the esophagus for days.
 - Do not feed the child or administer liquids. This will make the object lodge farther down.
 - If your child ingests a caustic substance, call 911 and the Palmetto Poison Center immediately at 800-222-1222.
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To make this a safe holiday season for your family and your guests, please check your home, garage and yard for items or substances that could harm a child. It only takes a moment to make your home safer for children.

Dr. Nirav Patel is a pediatric gastroenterologist at Palmetto Health Children's Hospital.

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