

Tiny batteries pose huge risk for small children

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RICK WILLS | Sunday, December 25, 2011 12:00 a.m.

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When little Teresa Zaleski became ill last month, her parents wondered for days what was wrong with their 2-year-old daughter.

It turned out that Teresa's worsening cough, loss of appetite and pneumonialike symptoms were the result of her swallowing a disc battery that lodged in and burned a hole in her esophagus.

Teresa, who comes from eastern Ohio, has been hospitalized at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh for four weeks. She has undergone two surgeries and is likely to spend at least another month in the hospital, said her father, Robert Zaleski.

Small, disc-shaped batteries are found in many gifts of the holiday season: toys, remote controls, cameras, watches, games, calculators and even singing greeting cards and talking children's books. They can be tempting to very young children, who might mistake them for a piece of candy, health experts said.

The battery Teresa swallowed apparently came from a small flashlight her brother had been given on a school field trip, her father said.

"Parents do not realize that these things are not innocuous. They set up an electrical current that becomes a burn," said Dr. Barbara Gaines, a pediatric surgeon and director of the Benedum Pediatric Trauma Program at Children's.

The risks are not widely known by the public, said Ed Krenzelok, director of the Pittsburgh Poison Center and a professor of pharmacy at the University of Pittsburgh.

"People are totally unaware of the fact that these batteries can have such devastating consequences," Krenzelok said.

Teresa cannot eat or swallow and was on breathing equipment for more than a week, said her father. Her trachea was damaged.

“The battery ate through her esophagus. That’s made all of this very complicated. We really did not know what had happened,” Zaleski said.

Doctors have reconstructed Teresa’s trachea, but she needs several more reconstructive surgeries on her esophagus, said Dr. Barbara Gaines, a pediatric surgeon and director of the Benedum Pediatric Trauma Program at Children’s. She is being fed intravenously.

Teresa is one of two children hospitalized at Children’s this year because of swallowing a battery. A boy spent four months in the hospital, Gaines said.

“With these two children, the battery burned a hole through the esophagus,” she said.

Zaleski said he had never considered the risk of such batteries.

“You hear about Drano and other poisons and know to keep them out of reach of small kids. I’d never really heard about the dangers of small batteries,” he said.

In 2010, the American Association of Poison Control Centers reported 3,807 disc battery ingestions nearly all occurring in children less than five years of age. The Pittsburgh Poison Center received reports of 57 ingestions of disc batteries involving children the same year.

Most do not become life threatening, Krenzelok said.

If a child ingests a battery, the Pittsburgh Poison Center can be contacted for assistance at 1-800-222-1222.