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Swallowed battery hazards: ER visits double

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By Linda Carroll

Susan and Mark Sadauskas thought they had made their home safe for their new baby with covers on all the electrical outlets and child proof latches on all the kitchen cabinets. But they didn't realize that there was another danger lurking in the house - the tiny lithium battery powering the remote control.

When he was 15 months-old Max somehow managed to pry open the remote, dig out the battery and swallow it. The Sadauskas rushed him to the emergency room when he started vomiting. And doctors soon had him in an X-ray machine where the battery could be seen clearly; it was lodged in little Max's throat.

"The image is burned into my brain forever," Max's father Mark told TODAY. "We just looked at each other and started crying... like.. this isn't happening."

Mark and Susan were scared. When Max went in to surgery to have the battery removed doctors couldn't tell them whether the little boy would ever be able to talk -- or even if he would survive.

"He came out of the surgery screaming for us," Susan remembers. "So that was a very good sign."

Max is now a healthy 2 year-old. But his parents will never forget the lesson they got on the dangers of button batteries.

Unfortunately Max isn't an isolated case.

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Every three hours a child shows up in a U.S. emergency room with a battery that's been swallowed or placed in the mouth, ears or nose, a new study shows.

That number is almost double what it was 20 years ago, according to the report published in Pediatrics Monday.

The main culprits are "button batteries," which account for almost 85 percent of the ER visits, researchers found. These coin-shaped batteries seem to be ubiquitous nowadays, turning up in a wide variety of electronic devices, from toys, to remote controls, to watches.

Although most kids seen by ER doctors are pronounced healthy and sent home, some of the newer batteries can cause serious damage if they lodge in the throat, says the study's lead author Dr. Gary Smith, director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

When kids get 3-volt 20 mm lithium batteries lodged in their esophagus, the moisture there can spark a microcurrent, Smith explains.

"That will lead to cell death and eventually burn a hole right through the esophagus," Smith says. "And that will lead to long term scarring and stricture. Even worse, there are some cases where it eroded right into the aorta and the child bled to death. These are horrific, horrific outcomes that need to be prevented."

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What's especially scary is that this can all happen quickly.

"Serious damage can occur in less than two hours," Smith says. "If parents have any suspicion that their child has swallowed a button battery - even if they're not sure - they need to take the child immediately to the emergency room to get an X-ray to see if the button battery is stuck in the esophagus... This can't wait till the next morning," says Smith.

The new study is based on nationally representative data collected over a 20 year period (1990 to 2009) from approximately 100 U.S. hospitals. When the researchers extrapolated the results to include all U.S. hospitals, they determined that there were nearly 66,000 emergency department visits by children under age 18 for issues involving a battery.

While some children were brought to the emergency room for batteries that had been placed in the mouth, ear or nose, the vast majority came in because batteries had been swallowed. In most of those cases were in children who were 5 or younger.

Button batteries accounted for a full 84 percent of all battery-related ingestions in children younger than 18.

“The real high risk age group peaks around the second year of life,” Smith says. “They put things in their mouths as part of exploration and these batteries are easy to swallow.

While almost a third of the ingested batteries came from toys and games, the majority came from devices such as hearing aids, watches, calculators, remote controls and flashlights. That’s why Smith and his colleagues would like to see manufacturers designing battery compartments with child safety in mind. In the meantime, he says, parents should consider taping battery compartments closed so children can’t get to the batteries inside.

“We can do better,” Smith says. “And it’s not that difficult.”

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