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Warning over button batteries and kids

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WHEN Dr Simon Craig saw the severe damage a bright, shiny button-sized battery did to a child unlucky enough to have swallowed it, he was surprised.

Working at the Monash Medical Centre's emergency department in Melbourne, Dr Craig said he had come across two cases in the past 18 months where children suffered serious injuries after ingesting the battery.

"I was a little surprised about how severe the complications were," he told AAP.

It only takes a matter of an hour or two after the batteries are swallowed before they begin their offensive.

"If it gets stuck in the oesophagus then you see it set up a bit of an electrical current within the tissue," Dr Craig said.

The current eventually causes burns and perforations, and if it moves forward will wound the windpipe or, if it points backwards, will damage the spine.

In one case Dr Craig saw a boy aged 14 months admitted to emergency with a fever.

Doctors eventually spotted the offending item in his oesophagus and after six days of treatment the boy was discharged from hospital.

But two weeks later the boy was readmitted with a severe spinal infection, which required three months of intravenous antibiotics and ongoing treatment for a narrowing of his oesophagus.

Dr Craig said he was sharing the case at the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine's annual scientific meeting in Hobart on Monday.

"If you can prevent one of these then you are preventing a child going through a lot of pain, spending three months in hospital and one family a whole lot of heartache," he said.

He urged parents to keep the devices holding the batteries - sometimes as large as a 10-cent coin - out of children's reach.

According to the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, about four children go to emergency departments across Australia each week with an injury relating to the batteries.

