

NEWS

Kids swallow the darnedest things, but research shows magnets and batteries can be silent killers

Peter Michael, CourierMail

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KIDS swallow everything from Barbie doll shoes to Lego, bugs, and coins.

X-rays of young children reveal objects as random as jewellery, toy soldiers and lost marbles.

But latest research, in analysis of hospital emergency wards, has uncovered a new silent but deadly epidemic.

Ruth Barker, an emergency pediatrician at Brisbane's Mater Children's Hospital, said about eight children a week in Australia are treated for swallowing button batteries and magnets.

"Kids swallow many things," Dr Barker said.

"Coins are common and usually not life-threatening. But any episode can be very dramatic for parents. Most have a story to tell."

Dr Barker, who is also director of Queensland's Injury Surveillance Unit, said coin-shaped lithium batteries and earth magnets could dissolve internal tissue if swallowed.

"Sometimes it is misdiagnosed as a coin. This can often be to devastating effect with severe and sometimes fatal bleeding," she said.

She cited the case of a Sydney boy, now aged three, who has had 10 operations, 23 X-rays and two-thirds of his oesophagus removed after eating a battery two years ago.

Australia introduced a nationwide ban on small, powerful magnets late last year. "It is a silent but deadly epidemic. Parents need to treat batteries like a poison and keep them out of reach of kids," Dr Barker said.

Five-year-old Hazel Mansell was rushed to Mater Children's Hospital last week after her tummy turned into a piggy bank. Doctors initially thought by the coin's size it was a 20c piece, but when it passed through it turned out to be just 5c.

"That's inflation for you," said mum Meg Mansell. "Hazel was in bed. She put a coin in her mouth, almost choked and ended up swallowing it," said the mother-of-two. "She is fine, but a little embarrassed."

Kidsafe Queensland's Susan Teerds said many children, mostly aged between one and six, ended up in hospital after swallowing a random object, some needing to be anaesthetised and operated on for it to be removed.

"Sometimes they choke and sometimes they swallow," Mrs Teerds said. "And sometimes they die or suffer severe brain damage as a result of being oxygen-deprived."

One of the latest heartbreaking cases is that of a six-year-old Gold Coast boy who swallowed a toy block, Mrs Teerds said.

It became lodged in his throat and, despite his dad performing CPR, he went into a coma and is now severely brain-damaged.

-- Peter Michael, North Queensland correspondent

Originally published as [Kids swallow the darnedest things](#)