

My daughter died by swallowing a button battery - don't let it happen to your child

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By Chloe Hamilton

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Button batteries such as these are often found in toys and watches.

Ahead of Child Safety Week, George Asan shares his story with Chloë Hamilton in the hope that it might help other parents avoid a similar tragic accident.

There was nothing unusual about that Sunday morning, says George.

The children were in the living room watching TV and playing with their toys; he was in the kitchen making breakfast; his wife was upstairs getting ready. Just a normal day.

Food poisoning

It was after lunch that his two-year-old daughter, Francesca, started to vomit.

Her parents assumed it was food poisoning.

Francesca refused food but wanted water, so they obliged. "We gave her water and some juice, whatever she wanted," explains George. "We also gave her some biscuits, because we thought that if she doesn't eat food, at least she has some sugar, so it will keep her going."

"I was looking forward to calling my wife and telling her, look, this is happening, it's no reason for us to panic."

That Tuesday, when there had been no improvement, a concerned George took Francesca to an emergency appointment at their GP's, where he was told his daughter might have a bug.

The duty doctor prescribed Calpol and Nurofen for the pain Francesca was complaining about and instructed George to bring her back if her condition didn't improve within two days.

No improvement

Francesca's condition didn't improve. She was waking in pain two or three times a night. "We just followed the doctor's advice and gave her Nurofen," says George.

He made another emergency appointment with the GP but was given the same advice and told to take Francesca to A&E if her condition worsened.

"My wife made me promise that I would bring her home no matter what," he says. "I said: 'Don't worry, of course I'm going to bring her home.'"

George says he wondered, that weekend, whether something was wrong with his daughter's teeth. Francesca kept pointing towards her mouth.

So, the following Monday, he took her to the dentist, where he was told Francesca's molars might be coming through – a painful process which can stop children eating. "Everything the dentist said kind of made sense," says George. "I was looking forward to calling my wife and telling her, look, this is happening, it's no reason for us to panic."

She went soft in my arms

But when he went to pick her up, Francesca "went soft" in his arms. He ran home. When he changed her nappy, he saw that the discharge was black. He called a taxi to the hospital. "My wife made me promise that I would bring her home no matter what," he says. "I said: 'Don't worry, of course I'm going to bring her home.'"

The taxi was quick, says George, who bit on his daughter's fingers to keep her awake.

Once at the hospital he ran into the elevator, where Francesca began to gasp for air. “I jumped out, ran through the children’s ward, and started shouting for the doctors,” says George. “From that moment started her last struggle for life.”

After a few hours, the doctors advised George to call his wife. Francesca died later that day.

Button battery

It wasn’t until a month later, at the inquest, that George found out a button battery had caused his daughter’s tragic death.

If you suspect your child has swallowed a button battery...

Take them straight to the A&E department at your local hospital or dial 999 for an ambulance.

Tell the doctor that you think your child has swallowed a button battery. If you have the battery packaging or the product powered by the battery, take it with. This will help the doctor identify the battery type and chemistry.

Do not let your child eat or drink.

Do not make them sick.

Trust your instincts and act fast – do not wait to see if any symptoms develop.

The coroner, who returned a verdict of misadventure, said the small round battery had become lodged in Francesca’s oesophagus and burned a hole through its lining.

The accident proved fatal for Francesca; she had been born with a rare heart condition which meant one of her arteries was closer than normal to her windpipe.

No specific symptoms

There are no specific symptoms associated with a child swallowing a button battery. They may appear to have a stomach upset or a virus, and symptoms can include tiredness, loss of appetite, pain and nausea.

“I went to the drawer where we keep the 3D glasses for the TV and I noticed that the spare battery was removed from the box,” says George.

Many parents don’t realise how dangerous button batteries are, he adds.

“I would advise parents not to keep in the house anything they don’t really need in that moment, especially spare batteries. You can access them now all night, we have 24-hour delivery, the shops are just around the corner. You don’t need to store anything if you don’t need it.”

How can I keep children safe?

Keep all spare batteries out of children's reach and sight, ideally in a high-up, lockable cupboard.

Keep products with batteries well out of reach if the battery compartment isn't secured with a screw.

Avoid toys from markets or temporary shops as they may not conform to safety regulations.

Teach older children that button batteries are dangerous and not to play with them or give them to younger brothers and sisters.

Remember that even used batteries can be dangerous, so recycle them safely.

He's keen to stress, though, that parents shouldn't restrict their children's freedom. Francesca, he says, was a normal, curious toddler.

You can't restrict toddlers

"You can't take the freedom from a toddler to explore and have a nice childhood," he says.

"Risks are everywhere. It's better to teach them by making somebody else aware of unfortunate situations and accidents. I think that is more effective than to be extremely restrictive. If you restrict a child, their curiosity is going to grow, so it's not going to help."

As part of Child Safety Week, which begins on Monday, the Child Accident Prevention Trust is asking all families to show they care by sharing their own experiences – not just about the horrors of accidents, but also the practical things they do to keep children safe.

George hopes some good will come from sharing his story. "Francesca was extremely special, so I think I owe that to her."

For more: capt.org.uk

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