

# Parents of injured toddler warn other families of 'button battery' danger

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*(Photo: Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital)*

NAPLES, Fla. — Toys are the hallmark of Christmas for children, but for one Naples girl, playtime almost [turned deadly](/story/news/health/2017/12/22/button-battery-dangers-batteries-kids-toys-swallowing/977103001/) weeks before the holiday season.

And the girl's parents want others to know the dangers of so-called "button batteries," found increasingly in children's toys.

Marco Soto and his wife, Vivianne Gutierrez, were hosting a gathering with friends at their home Nov. 4, enjoying a meal and watching their youngest daughter, Isabella, play when Soto noticed something was amiss.

Isabella, just 21 months old at the time, staggered toward her father, tears in her eyes, unable to breathe.

"I was just terrified," Gutierrez, 38, recalled in a phone interview Friday.

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Soto, 37, rushed to his daughter and tried to dislodge whatever was stuck in her throat with well-placed slaps on her back. She spit up some saliva and blood.

The toddler started breathing again, but Soto knew something was wrong.

The family raced to NCH Baker Hospital Downtown where X-rays showed Isabella had swallowed a small round object. Doctors suspected a button battery, increasingly found in children's toys.



Marco Soto, right, and his wife, Vivianne Gutierrez, pose with their children, Isabella, and Danara, at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg. Isabella swallowed a button battery, requiring surgeons to remove it. *(Photo: Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital)*

Isabella needed to go to Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida in Fort Myers where doctors tried to remove the tiny battery. But after 2 1/2 hours of waiting and worrying, doctors told Soto and Gutierrez they were unable to extract the coin-sized battery.

A helicopter airlifted Isabella to Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg where the toddler was rushed into an operating room. With the help of a rigid tube, a surgical team examined the esophagus and found the battery stuck just above Isabella's aorta.

Within minutes, Dr. David Kays, a pediatric surgeon at the hospital, grasped the battery and pulled it out.

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But after being stuck in Isabella's esophagus for hours, the battery managed to cause extensive damage, creating a fistula, or hole, and injuring the trachea.

Isabella now has a feeding tube into her belly because the scarring to her esophagus prevents her from swallowing food.

More surgeries will be needed to help the toddler heal while doctors wait to see if the fistula will close on its own. If it doesn't, they will have to operate on it.

The road to recovery is a long one for Isabella but her parents said they are grateful to the hospital staff and God for saving their youngest child.

"It was awful and the worst 10 hours (of) our life," said Gutierrez. "She almost died."

Button batteries are especially hazardous to children because of their small size, said Dr. Joseph Perno, a pediatric emergency medicine physician at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital.

"So the child can easily swallow it," he said. "Which in itself is not terrible, but unfortunately many times it gets caught in the esophagus."

Once it gets stuck, the acid in the battery can mix with the saliva, leak out and damage surrounding tissue, Perno said.

"It can cause damage to this tissue in a matter of hours," he said.

Perno said they are seeing "maybe a little bit more" cases of children swallowing button batteries as of late.

"The batteries are a little more prevalent these days," he said. "It used to be these batteries were used typically for just watches. They were basically known as watch batteries. But now they're present in more kids toys."

The batteries are also found in singing greeting cards and can be easily accessed by a young child if ripped open, Perno said.

Perno said parents should make sure they don't have any of the button batteries laying around and be vigilant about what their children put into their mouths.

Though there is no one toy to watch out for, Perno said toys that are powered by a button battery that is accessible without removing a screw are especially dangerous.



Isabella Soto smiles while relaxing at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg. The daughter of Marco Soto and Vivianne Gutierrez, Isabella, not yet 2, will require more surgeries to heal after she swallowed a button battery, found in a number of children's toys. (Photo: Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital)

"If it's just got a little clasp that would be something I'd want to use extra caution for," he said.

Gutierrez and Soto haven't been able to find the culprit yet. Aside from one short day at home, they've spent their time at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital with Isabella and her 6-year-old sister, Danara Soto.

The couple wants to make sure no other family has to endure what they did.

"Please take care with the toys on this Christmas," Gutierrez said. "I didn't know the battery can be so dangerous."

And though the family will have to spend their Christmas in a hospital room, Gutierrez said they're simply grateful to still have their daughter.

"It doesn't matter if you have presents or not because (...) life is just a present," she said. "It's a big present."

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