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'Button' batteries a growing hazard for children

Reuters

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - The rate of severe poisonings from battery ingestion among U.S. children has risen in the past 25 years, along with the growing use of lithium "button" batteries in a wide range of consumer products, new research shows.

The number of children who die or suffer serious injuries each year remains quite small, but such severe cases are accounting for a growing proportion of all button-battery poisonings, researchers report in the journal *Pediatrics*.

The findings underscore the importance of keeping the small, disc-shaped batteries out of children's reach, say the investigators, led by Dr. Toby Litovitz of the National Capital Poison Center in Washington, D.C.

Between 1985 and 2009, U.S. poison-control centers received 59,535 reports of button-battery ingestion. The yearly incidence rates fluctuated, with no pattern of an increase over time.

However, the rate of severe poisonings clearly rose, Litovitz and his colleagues found.

From 1985 through 1987, just 0.06 percent of button-battery ingestions were fatal or had "major" complications -- mainly damage to the esophagus that often required surgery and led to prolonged problems with breathing and eating.

That figure increased nearly seven-fold by the three-year period from 2007 to 2009, when 0.44 percent of all button-battery swallowings proved fatal or severe.

Children younger than 4 were the most frequent victims, and in nearly all cases of severe complications, a particular type of button battery -- the 20-millimeter lithium cell -- was to blame.

Button batteries are used in a wide variety of products, including cameras, remote controls, watches, hearing aids, toys and even musical greeting cards. Compared with other types of button batteries, 20-mm lithium cells are larger (about the size of a nickel) and more apt to become lodged in the esophagus if swallowed.

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