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For Very Young, Peril Lurks in Lithium Cell Batteries

TARA PARKER-POPE

Published: Monday, May 31, 2010 at 6:01 a.m.

Last Modified: Wednesday, June 2, 2010 at 5:08 a.m.

Last fall, 13-month-old Aidan Truett of Hamilton, Ohio, developed what seemed like an upper respiratory infection. He lost interest in food and vomited a few times, but doctors attributed it to a virus. After nine days of severe symptoms and more doctor visits, the hospital finally ordered an X-ray to look for pneumonia.

What they found instead was totally unexpected. The child had ingested a "button" battery, one of those flat silver discs used to power remote controls, toys, musical greeting cards, bathroom scales and other home electronics.

The battery was surgically removed the next day, and Aidan was sent home. But what neither the doctors nor his parents realized was that the damage had been done. The battery's current had set off a chemical reaction in the child's esophagus, burning through both the esophageal wall and attacking the aorta. Two days after the battery was removed, Aidan began coughing blood, and soon died from his injuries.

To this day, Aidan's parents don't know where the battery came from. "This is something I would never want another parent to live with," said Michelle Truett, Aidan's mother. "I was oblivious as to how dangerous they were, and I want more people to know the danger."

Such deaths are extremely rare. There were fewer than 10 documented during the last six years. But ingestion of lithium cell batteries, which children may mistake for candy and elderly adults for medication, is a surprisingly common problem, documented this week in two reports in the medical journal *Pediatrics*.

About 3,500 cases of button cell battery ingestion are reported annually to poison control centers. But while swallowing batteries has occurred for years, the development of larger, stronger lithium cell batteries has increased the risk of severe complications.

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