



# Paramedic's Toddler Dies Four Days After Swallowing Button Battery That Burned Through His Organs

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## **His devastated parents had no idea until the autopsy.**

A North Carolina toddler has died four days after swallowing a button battery.

23-month-old Johnathan Huff bled to death after the tiny battery from a remote control keyfinder burned through his internal organs.

His parents, both medical professionals, did not discover the culprit until it was too late.

It was on December 16 that paramedic AJ Huff, 34, and his 35-year-old wife Jackie Huff, a physician's assistant, believe their son somehow got hold of the battery from the remote — which was kept in a pail on a counter 4.5 ft off the ground — in the morning rush to get ready for daycare.

"AJ and I have gone over in our heads a million times and we have no idea, we can only imagine it was during that 20-minute time span," Jackie said.

"At some point one of us didn't have eyes on him. We know all this now because of how everything played out but the assumption is that the battery came from that remote."

While at work, Jackie received a terrifying phone call, that Johnathan had suffered a nosebleed before vomiting up blood during a nap.

Paramedics were called, and deduced that blood from his nosebleed had gone down the back of his throat, which caused him to vomit it back up. They took him to the pediatrician to get checked, who agreed this was the most likely case.

"It's a reasonable explanation and it's exactly what I would say as a medical professional, 100 percent," Jackie said.

The following morning he was fine at daycare, but that evening his temperature shot to 101, and they brought him back to the doctor.

He suggested it may have been a viral illness that caused the original nosebleed, and was now causing fever. He was swabbed for Covid, and had a chest x-ray taken. Tragically, the battery did not show up.

"There was no battery on that x-ray picture, the only explanation is that the battery must have already travelled lower than the chest at this point," Jackie said.

This time, doctors guessed he might have bronchiolitis, and sent him home with orders to rest and stay hydrated.

He was fine all day Saturday, resting and watching TV, and even got some of his appetite back and was asking for snacks.

But early on Sunday morning, his temperature went back up, and he coughed up a little blood. While he seemed fine besides and was smiling and in good form, he went for a nap; but around 9 AM began coughing in his sleep.

"I picked him up, then he coughed again and vomited bright red blood all down my shirt. It was a lot, it was very shocking," his mom said.

They immediately called an ambulance, administering CPR while waiting for the paramedics to arrive.

"AJ said he could feel him go limp in his arms. His hands drew up, his lips turned blue and he was unconscious," she said.

"AJ called 911 while I held him. Neither of us were freaking out yet because once again we've been in this situation with other families throughout our careers."

But as his heartbeat faded, they knew they were losing him.

"There was no air going in and when I took my mouth off bright red blood just gurgled out of him," she said.

By the time she made it to the hospital after the ambulance, the boy was already dead.

"The ER doctor immediately walked over to me and started the speech, the speech that I've given people so many times," she recalled.

It wasn't until the autopsy days later did they discover the seemingly-innocuous killer.

Lithium cells can be extremely dangerous to young children when swallowed — and not just the choking risk.

The negative side of the battery reacts with bodily fluids, such as mucus or saliva, completing a circuit and producing a caustic soda that can burn through human tissue in as little as two hours.

In little Johnathan's case, the battery had eaten through his oesophagus, intestines and eventually — fatally — his aorta.

Johnathan's parents are hoping his tragic story will alert parents to the dangers, advising that something as simple as duct taping the backs of remotes could save a life.

Last year, Duracell announced that it was coating some of their lithium button cells with a bitterant compound to discourage children from putting them in their mouths.

If a child does swallow one, doctors advise feeding them honey to help counter the effect until help arrives.