

Swallowing button batteries can be serious

Reviewed By: Thomas Abramo, M.D., director of Pediatric Emergency Medicine (Last Updated: September 27, 2011)



Teething babies and curious toddlers inevitably will put something in their mouths. But the wrong objects can be dangerous, especially if they have a battery.

Small, coin-sized batteries, also called button batteries, can cause serious health problems and even lead to death if swallowed by children.

Between 2006 and 2011, 11 children died after swallowing button batteries, which can be found in remote controls, calculators, watches, key chains, bathroom scales, and musical greeting cards.

Emergency doctors at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt encounter these cases regularly. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), studies have found that button battery-related incidents resulting in severe injury and fatality have increased sevenfold since 1985. The National Capital Poison Center said more than 3,500 swallowing cases are reported each year in the U.S.

Thomas Abramo, M.D., director of Pediatric Emergency Medicine, says these batteries can become lodged in a child's esophagus and can cause significant problems within just a few hours after they are swallowed.

"Unlike the stomach, which has protective layers, the lining of the esophagus is very vulnerable," says Abramo. "The electricity from the battery can cause erosion and burns, and can lead to bleeding and other major problems."

He says it's important for parents and caregivers to immediately seek medical assistance if you suspect a child has swallowed a disc-like battery.

Children's Hospital works closely with the national advocacy group Safe Kids USA, and supports its recent awareness campaign with Energizer, "The Battery Controlled," to help prevent these injuries.

Below are some tips to prevent button battery injuries provided by the CPSC:

- Discard button batteries carefully.

- Do not allow children to play with button batteries. Keep them out of your child's reach.
- Caution hearing aid users to keep hearing aids and batteries out of the reach of children.
- Keep remotes and other electronics out of your child's reach if the battery compartments do not have a screw to secure them. Use tape to secure the battery compartment.
- If a button battery is ingested, immediately seek medical attention. The National Battery Ingestion Hotline is available anytime at (202) 625-3333 (call collect if necessary), or call your poison center at (800) 222-1222.

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