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NEWS

Button batteries can be fatal to kids if ingested, experts warn

By BY MONICA ENG
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When Susan Sadauskas turned her back for a few moments on her 15-month-old son, Max, the Ohio mom never imagined that the toddler would make his way to the remote control for her stereo, remove its coin-shaped battery and swallow it.

So when she later saw the disassembled device on the coffee table, she didn't think much of it.

That changed when Max began to throw up at the dinner table, and his parents took him to the emergency room. There, staff detected the nickel-size battery stuck in the boy's esophagus and rushed him to Nationwide Children's Hospital for emergency surgery.

"Max was really lucky that we caught it within a two- to three-hour time period so he didn't have any damage to his esophagus," said Sadauskas, of Columbus. "But if we had waited, the damage would have been pretty bad."

Last year, more than 20 children suffered major injuries or died after ingesting button batteries, leading to public awareness campaigns this holiday season. The batteries are often used to power small electronic devices, from remote controls and watches to musical cards and ornaments.

FEEDBACK

On Monday, doctors and safety experts joined Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan to discuss the issue at her annual news conference on the state's Safe Shopping Guide, which compiles information about product recalls.

"The battery gets stuck in the esophagus and it starts to discharge its energy, and it doesn't take a lot to cause a serious burn," said Dr. Steve Krug, who heads the emergency department at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago. "It doesn't seem like a lot of energy, but it's focused in a delicate place."

Krug said that in most cases, parents do not witness the ingestion, making it hard to connect symptoms, including loss of appetite, irritability and vomiting, to the problem. The shiny objects are most likely to be ingested by children age 4 or younger.

This year, 80 cases of button battery ingestion were reported in Illinois and 3,500 cases nationally, though authorities believe those numbers represent only a small portion of the actual cases. Ten deaths — none in Illinois — have been associated with ingestion of the batteries since 2008 nationally, Madigan said. All were children.

Although the number of battery ingestion incidents has held steady in recent years, according to the National Capital Poison Center, moderate to fatal outcomes have risen sevenfold since 1985.

Michael Wahl, medical director of the Illinois Poison Center, said most of the recent deaths were associated with newer lithium batteries that have become popular over the last six years.

"They were stronger and had a longer life and you could do more with them," Wahl said. "But they also caused much more injury than the other batteries could."

Madigan urged parents to look through the electronic devices in their homes to be sure that batteries are in secure compartments and that no spare batteries are within reach of children. She herself recently found a button battery on the floor of a playroom in her house after her children brought it home from a Halloween party, she said.

Krug has been part of a discussion — which included the American Academy of Pediatrics and Consumer Products Safety Commission — aimed at finding solutions to the problem. In June, U.S. Sens. Jay Rockefeller and Mark Pryor introduced a bill that would mandate more safety measures, but it remains in committee.

Krug said he advocates an approach that includes public awareness and voluntary actions by industry. "But if voluntary actions don't get us to a solution," he said, "then we'll see what can you achieve through the law."

Some sectors of industry have already responded. This fall, Energizer joined with the Safe Kids USA network to launch an awareness campaign called "The Battery Controlled," and the company is developing new packaging for button-size batteries that is harder to open.

Dr. Kris Jatana operated on young Max Sadauskas as a surgeon with Nationwide Children's Hospital, and his experience with such cases has turned him into an advocate who has appeared before the Consumer Products Safety Commission. He said he also believes in public education and voluntary action.

"These are the short-term solutions that we can focus on right now," he said, "but our hope is that there will be a long-term solution for the future and it will save lives."

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FEEDBACK

How to get a list of recalled products

On Monday, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan unveiled her fifth annual holiday Safe Shopping Guide, listing children's products that have been recalled in 2011. Although most of the items are no longer available on store shelves, many may still be in circulation through secondhand shops and websites like eBay and Craigslist. The 42-page guide is available at illinoisattorneygeneral.gov or by calling 888-414-7678.

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