

# A battery nearly killed our son

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Ten-month-old Te Kahu Harmer almost died on the operating table after a battery he swallowed caused horrific internal injuries.

The Bunbury baby had to undergo life-saving surgery to stop a rare condition where his heart was pumping blood through a hole into his stomach - the result of an ulcer, caused by battery burn.

Now parents Sorren Thomas and Caleb Harmer want to alert other families to the danger of lithium button batteries - which are found in musical greeting cards and small household appliances such as bathroom scales, remote controls and electric candles.

Their warning comes as Kidsafe, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and the battery industry are preparing to launch a national campaign, after a spate of lithium battery swallowing injuries, including seven cases in five weeks at Princess Margaret Hospital in October.

Saliva triggers an electrical current when it comes into contact with lithium batteries which can result in severe burns to internal tissue within two hours. The battery was lodged in Te Kahu's oesophagus for 12 hours.

Te Kahu appeared to have made a full recovery after doctors removed a lithium button battery which had come from his dad's guitar tuner.

But four weeks after the battery was removed, Ms Thomas noticed her baby was unsettled one night and went to feed him a bottle.

"I picked him up and he stopped breathing," she said.

"He took a massive gasp and went blue and wasn't breathing at all."

An ambulance was called and Te Kahu started breathing shallow breaths again, but Ms Thomas noticed he had blood running out of his mouth.

"The ambulance took us to Bunbury (Hospital) and when we got to Bunbury he started to vomit up blood," Ms Thomas said. "They called the flying doctors and they took us to Perth and by the time he got to Perth he was vomiting dark red blood and it was full of clots."

When doctors at Princess Margaret Hospital for Children attempted to put an intravenous drip in Te Kahu's foot he got upset and stopped breathing again, Ms Thomas said.

"They ran him off to the room on the side and suddenly I remember it was full of doctors and nurses and they said you've got to leave, we've got to put a tube down, we don't know what the blood's from but he might not even live through the tube going down."

Doctors inserted the tube and a CT scan revealed Te Kahu had developed an aorto-esophageal fistula - a hole between his aorta, the main artery leading from the heart, and his oesophagus at the top of his stomach - after an ulcer burst.

The ulcer had grown undetected after the initial battery burn and blood had poured from his heart into his stomach.

After six hours of surgery on his oesophagus and a further eight-hour operation on his heart, requiring a blood transfusion, Te Kahu pulled through.

He spent another two weeks in intensive care and almost three months in hospital, returning home two days before Christmas.

The toddler is still feeding through a tube and is undergoing a procedure to widen his oesophagus every three weeks.

Paediatric gastroenterologist Madhur Ravikumara, part of the medical team who treated Te Kahu, described the baby's injury as "dreadful" and said he was believed to be the only survivor in the world of this type of injury.

"It's fantastic that he has survived," said Dr Ravikumara, adding that PMH was now fast-tracking patients who had swallowed button batteries.

Ms Thomas said she still had nightmares and couldn't sleep because she was terrified her baby would stop breathing again.

"I've watched my little baby fight for his life. I've watched him stop breathing in my arms, I've been covered in his blood," Ms Thomas said. "I watched his life nearly slip away before my eyes, countless times I've watched his little face so terrified and I can't help."

## WHAT TO DO

If you suspect your child has ingested a button battery:

Check and clear the airways. If the battery is stuck in the throat there could be a threat to breathing;

If the battery can't be removed and breathing is normal call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately;

DO NOT give food or drink and DO NOT induce vomiting;

Seek medical attention immediately. SOURCE: Kidsafe WA

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