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Swallowed batteries send thousands of kids to ER yearly

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A growing number of children are swallowing batteries, especially circular "button batteries," leading to thousands of emergency room visits each year and, in a few cases, deaths, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

From 1997 through 2010, nearly 30,000 young children up to age 4 were taken to emergency rooms for battery-related injuries, the report said, with more than half the cases involving button batteries.

Fourteen deaths from battery-related injuries were reported over that period in children ages 7 months to 3 years old.

After swallowing batteries, kids suffered injuries such as chemical burns, hemorrhaging and tears in the esophagus.

Because the symptoms of swallowing a battery, including abdominal pain, fever and breathing problems, could be caused by many things, diagnosing the problem is difficult and may be delayed, according to the report.

In one case, a 2-year-old boy was released from an emergency department after being treated for choking and coughing, only to return a week later, when he died of hemorrhaging. In other cases where children died, they had initially been treated for viral infections, strep throat, and croup.

All told, an estimated 40,400 children ages 13 and younger visited the emergency room in 1997-2010, and 10 percent of them were admitted into the hospital.

"Parents and caregivers should be aware of the potential hazards associated with battery exposure (particularly ingestion of button batteries), and ensure that products containing them are either kept away from children or that the batteries are secured safely in the product," the CDC wrote.

Other doctors also have warned that button batteries can be inhaled, injuring children's airways.

Health care providers should counsel parents on the potential dangers of button cell batteries for children, the CDC said.

The CDC report will be published tomorrow (Aug. 31) in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

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