

Tiny Batteries Causing Big Health Problems for Kids

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By Jim Avila August 30, 2012

The small coin-sized batteries found in many toys, electronics and singing greeting cards could be life-threatening in children.

An analysis released today by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Consumer Product Safety Commission found 14 children who are aged 13 and under have died, and more than 40,000 have been injured from small batteries.

Scott Wolfson, director of communications for the CPSC, called these batteries a "serious hazard."

"There is growing attention to this hazard and an increase in the number of fatalities," Wolfson said. "Today, more of these small batteries are being used in products such as remote controls, greeting cards, flashlights and CPSC is seeing children getting access to those batteries."

Statistics in the report appear to support Wolfson's argument that these cases are on the rise.

Of the 14 deaths reported between 1997-2010 half were reported in 2009-2010 and 72 percent of ED visits throughout 1995-2010 were among children aged 4 and under.

Part of what makes these ingestions so dangerous is by the time symptoms like severe abdominal pain or vomiting appear burns, ulcers and severe damage to the esophagus or gut has likely already occurred.

"That's what's so scary about these, you can get damage so quickly," said Alison Tothy, director of pediatric emergency medicine at the University of Chicago. "But how many parents bring their kids to the emergency department for a little belly pain, but 8, 12, 14 hours later they are still having belly pain and starting to vomit...and there is even more damage that has been done because battery has sat there for 24 hours."

She said it's important to bring children in right away if you think they swallowed something.

"The window of opportunity to get those out before they cause damage is pretty small," she said. "It's usually within four hours a battery can cause damage."

A May study in *Pediatrics* showed similar findings. Children being taken to emergency departments with battery ingestions have increased-with more than 65,000 ED visits involving kids 18 and under between 1990-2009.

"We live in a world designed by adults for the convenience of adults, and the safety of children is often not considered," said Gary Smith, director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital and author of the May study.

Smith found ED visits doubled from 2,591 visits in 1990 to 5,525 in 2009 and the number of button batteries swallowed by children also doubled.

Chairman for the CPSC, Inez Moore Tenenbaum, has called on major manufacturers of button and coin-cell batteries to address the safety of their products and wants to see safety standards in place to address the problem.

Wolfson says the changes can't come soon enough.

"We want these products that use button cells to be designed in a way that children can never get access to them," Wolfson said. "We believe that there can be innovations in both the way the battery is made and how it is used in various products."

In the 1980s, toys and other children's products were required to secure tiny batteries so kids can't get to them.

A bill introduced last year by Sen. Jay Rockefeller IV, D-W.Va., would require all products with button batteries to be childproof.

The CPSC said parents should never let kids play with batteries and take caution to make sure they are disposed of properly.

If you think your child swallowed a battery call the national batteries ingest hotline: 202-625-3333 or the national universal poison control hotline: 1800-222-1222.