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Swallowed battery could have caused serious damage



By Grant LaFleche, The Standard
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The clock was running.

With each moment, the small silver disc stayed where it was, the risk that it would spill its toxic innards through the baby's body.

The medical team had an hour, at most, before the lithium battery would corrode and begin releasing a poisonous cocktail that could burn through 15-month-old Ethan Gaudet's flesh.

The doctors in the St. Catharines emergency department couldn't reach it. It had worked itself too far into the boy's throat.

There wasn't a choice. Ethan would have to go under the knife.

When the crisis was passed, his panicked mother was afforded a few moments to visit her only child. All Sarah Gaudet could do was weep.

"I was scared," she says, unable to hold back tears while telling the story at her St. Catharines home. "There he was, unconscious in the hospital bed, with all these tubes in his mouth ... wearing only a diaper."

It was a three-hour ordeal that began on a bland September morning, when a dog's bark collar fell on the floor.

"I had taken the dog's bark collar off and put it on the table," Gaudet says. "I don't know how it fell on the floor, but it did."

When it fell, the back on the device popped open, releasing two small lithium batteries.

"I grabbed one but before I could get the other, Ethan had already picked it up put it in his mouth," Gaudet says. "He is the sort of boy that when he has something in his mouth and you try to get it, he'll clench his teeth and throw his head back and fuss."

That moment, lived between the ticks of a clock, triggered the worst day of Gaudet's life as a mother.

Ethan immediately began vomiting.

"So I thought, OK here we go, he'll throw this up and he'll be OK," Gaudet says. "But it didn't come out."

Gaudet called poison control and the operator made the matter plain.

"I was told in a case like this I had to take him to hospital. I says, 'Ok' as I am getting my clothes on, the operator says, 'Do you understand what I'm saying. You have to take him to the hospital now.' "

Ethan was still breathing, and while choking was still a possible risk, the real danger was the chemical composition of the battery.

Dr. Greg Bosey, regional chief of anaesthesia for the NHS, says the human body can break down the outer coating of a battery in as little as 60 minutes. Once that happens, the acids in the battery can start to burn through tissue unchecked, causing serious, sometimes irreparable damage. Depending on the circumstances, it could be fatal.

When Gaudet arrived at St. Catharines General Hospital, medical staff, including registered nurse Kelly Watson and Dr. Rafi Setrak, jumped on the case. Ethan was triaged and X-rayed immediately.

Setrak says the battery hadn't blocked Ethan's airway, but it was too far down his throat for it to be removed in the ER.

Bosey and Dr. Sushma Amin, an ear, nose and throat specialist, were called in. Ethan was headed for surgery.

A second X-ray showed the battery had moved further into Ethan's body. Enough time had passed for the battery to start burning Ethan's throat. It had to come out now.

Bosey says the surgery was smooth. Three hours after Ethan swallowed the battery it was removed without incident. The burns to Ethan's throat were not serious enough to cause lasting damage.

"The great thing about this is how well the entire team worked together to help this little guy," says Setrak, who says about 20 NHS employees were involved in the case. "This is what we do everyday and it worked very, very well in this case."

Gaudet says Ethan was taken by Ornge ambulance to Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto for observation.

Ethan shows no ill effect from his ordeal, his mother says. Within days, he was acting as though nothing had ever happened.

"We've become really good at getting him to open his mouth when we say, 'Aaah!' though," Gaudet says.

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