Parents, Beware: Lithium "Button" Batteries Can Kill

Study finds that small children can pry small batteries out of common household products; a swallowed battery can damage the throat, or worse.

By Adam Bean

THE DETAILS: In the study, researchers analyzed 8,648 cases of battery ingestion reported to the National Battery Ingestion Hotline. The majority of cases of swallowed batteries involved small children, though a significant number also occurred among the elderly. Among the cases involving kids, 62 percent occurred when children removed batteries from products, and 30 percent occurred when kids found the batteries loose out of the package.

“Button batteries lodged in the esophagus can cause severe tissue damage in just two hours,” write the study authors. Serious complications may include esophageal strictures (severe narrowing), perforations, and vocal cord paralysis. Among the 8,648 ingestion cases reported in the study, 13 resulted in death. The batteries generally don’t cause choking. What happens is, body tissue is exposed to the battery’s current, which results in the formation of hydroxide that can burn through the esophagus.