

Monday, 28 November 2016

INCREASE IN INJURY FROM WATER EXPANDING BEADS PROMPTS WARNING TO PARENTS

Parents are being warned about the dangers of water expanding beads as the NSW Poisons Information Centre (NSWPIC) report a sharp increase in incidents involving the beads.

Since 2004, at least 129 children have swallowed the beads, with 112 of those incidents happening in the past three years. Of the children affected, 21 of them were hospitalised.

The NSWPIC findings, published today by the Medical Journal of Australia in the short report *'Dangerous toys: the expanding problem of water-absorbing beads,'* highlight the need for increased consumer protection awareness and safety initiatives.

"The beads can swell up to 400 times their original size when immersed in water, so if a child swallows an un-expanded bead it can swell up in their gut and cause a blockage," said Dr Rose Cairns, Senior Poisons Specialist at the NSW Poisons Information Centre.

"Some of them grow to larger than a golf ball in size. This can be very dangerous."

There have been several reports of children requiring emergency surgery for intestinal obstructions after ingesting the water beads. Serious complications have also been documented, including the death of a six-month-old child overseas.

"The beads do not show up on X-rays and invasive procedures, such as endoscopy and surgery, can be necessary to locate and remove them," Dr Cairns said.

Water expanding beads, sometimes called 'water balls', 'dragon eggs' or 'fairy eggs', look like lollies and are very attractive to young children. They can also be different shapes such as animals or fairies and are most commonly used to decorate vases with flower arrangements. Most recently they are being marketed as toys and learning aids.

"Although manufacturers market the beads as 'non-toxic' it is important to recognise that this does not mean 'non-hazardous,'" Dr Cairns said.

"These beads should not be marketed as toys and should be sold in child resistant packaging with adequate warnings to keep out of reach of children."

NSW Poisons Information Centre advises the following:

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- Do not use water expanding beads as toys or learning aids.
- Water expanding beads should be kept out of reach of children and out of sight.
- Larger beads (anything that expands to greater than 1cm in diameter) are particularly hazardous and should be avoided completely in homes with children.
- If consumers suspect their child may have swallowed a water expanding bead, call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26, (24/7, Australia wide).

Despite the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) urging businesses to remove water beads from the shelves and not market them as toys, the product can still be easily purchased in Australia online, at markets, and arts and craft stores.

The study is published as *“Dangerous toys: the expanding problem of water-absorbing beads”* and can be found at mja.com.au.