



January, 2014

Danger of alkali burns from button batteries

The Children's Hospital at Westmead is warning parents about the dangers of lithium batteries (otherwise known as button batteries) if swallowed by children.

The warning follows the admission of three children who suffered internal alkali (caustic) burns from ingesting lithium batteries last December.

Dr John Curotta, Head of Department of Ear Nose and Throat Surgery at The Children's Hospital at Westmead said parents should check electronic devices, such as toys, remote controls, musical cards and digital thermometers, to ensure batteries are safely secured to prevent serious injury.

"Button batteries are very dangerous. The problem with button batteries is that although they are flat in appearance they are never really 'flat'. These batteries still hold enough residual charge to cause significant damage and carry the same risk as fully powered batteries if swallowed."

"Parents must check and double check battery powered items to ensure these batteries cannot be easily accessed by children. This is really relevant particularly over Christmas with lots of toys and children together," Dr Curotta said.

If a child does swallow a lithium battery it is an emergency.

"The biggest concern is about the battery becoming stuck in the oesophagus where it can cause severe and potentially life-threatening injuries."

"These injuries can include alkali burns, perforation, infection, internal bleeding and in some cases, death. We remember a 4 year old girl dying in Queensland last year from just this," Dr Curotta said.

Alkali burns occur when a battery is lodged in one place for more than an hour. The saliva in the oesophagus allows the remaining power in the battery to generate alkali and this caustic then burns through the oesophagus. The battery forms a pellet of 'Drano' around itself.

"For a child who has swallowed a battery, every minute matters. We need to get them to surgery as quickly as possible to remove the battery before it causes long-term damage."

Parents should respond quickly if it is suspected that their child has swallowed a battery by getting the child to an emergency department immediately. Children should not be given any food or drink and vomiting should not be induced.

Battery Tips

- Keep batteries out of the reach of children
- Do not change batteries on a surface accessible by children
- Ensure electronic devices have a secure cover over batteries

Statistics

2012

2 admission to The Children's Hospital at Westmead

7 admissions to Sydney Children's Hospital

2013

8 admissions to The Children's Hospital at Westmead

6 admissions to Sydney Children's Hospital

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