



MEDIA RELEASE

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Surgeons warn of dangers of children swallowing small batteries over the holiday break

The festive season is traditionally a time of gift giving and many gifts involve small batteries. Ear Nose and Throat surgeons are warning parents and child caregivers to be aware that serious internal injuries and even death could result from small children swallowing button batteries.

Button batteries are the small round silver batteries used for a variety of electronic devices such as toys, thermometers, weighing scales, watches and even greeting cards. The most dangerous are those about the size of a five cent coin.

Small, shiny and appealing to children, increased use of button batteries in homes has heightened the need to be aware of the health dangers if they fall into the hands of crawling infants and inquisitive small children.

Head of Ear, Nose and Throat Surgery at Sydney's Westmead Children's Hospital, Dr John Curotta, has stressed the need for families to be aware of the potential hazards of these batteries, particularly with new toys and devices being given as Christmas presents at this time of year.

"In Australia, we know of at least two deaths and a number of serious internal injuries resulting from swallowed button batteries – all incurred by children under five years of age," Dr Curotta said

Dr Curotta, a Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, says the danger occurs when the disc-battery becomes stuck half way down the throat and the remaining charge in the battery, even when low, or 'flat', creates chemical caustic that erodes through into the chest or large blood vessels.

"If a child swallows a button battery it is an emergency, and that child must receive immediate medical attention," Dr Curotta said.

"They should not be given food or drink and vomiting should not be induced."

Dr Curotta urged vigilance by parents and caregivers to ensure batteries are safely stored and not to assume that every battery product in the home is safe for unsupervised use by children.

In many cases, children swallowing batteries go undiagnosed for days and if parents have not seen their child physically swallow the battery, they often don't realise what is causing their child's illness," Dr Curotta said.

If a child displays an unexplained sudden onset of drooling, painful swallowing, or is unable to swallow food but is able to swallow liquids, it is possible that a foreign object may be present in the airway.

Even if you have not seen it, there is a chance they may have swallowed a button battery. Urgent diagnosis is essential, usually by x-ray, for removal without delay.

In this instance the strong advice is to take your child to the nearest hospital Emergency Department for immediate treatment.

MEDIA CONTACT:

For any further information, please contact the Australian Society of Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery, the representative organisation for Ear Nose and Throat Head and Neck Surgeons in Australia.

Tel: 02 9954 5856

Email: info@asohns.org.au