

## **BUTTON BATTERY SAFETY ALERT**

Lithium cell batteries (Button Batteries) are found in thousands of products including toys, flashlights, TV remote controls, hearing aids and singing greeting cards and are a growing hazard, especially to small children. More than 3500 cases of button cell battery ingestion are reported to poison control centers every year. Young children, who mistakenly think the battery is candy or older adults who think they are pills, are especially vulnerable to this type of accidental ingestion which can result in devastating injuries. Swallowing a battery is especially dangerous since the battery may become lodged in the esophagus or in the gastrointestinal tract where the moist lining acts as a conductor and allows current to flow through the battery causing internal burns. Severe burns can occur in as little as two hours after a lithium battery is swallowed and once burning begins, damage can continue even after the battery is removed.

According to the **United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC)**, a recent study by Dr. Toby Litovitz of the National Capital Poison Center found that button battery related incidents resulting in serious injuries and fatalities have increased sevenfold since 1985. According to his article in Pediatrics, children younger than six years of age account for 68% of battery ingestion cases. Almost all fatalities involved 20-mm batteries, the size commonly used in remote controls. In most of these cases the batteries were not found loose, but had been removed from a remote or other device by a child. Dr. Litovitz reported to the New York Times that children's symptoms after ingestion are usually nonspecific and resemble common ailments such as an upset stomach or fever and are difficult to diagnose because parents frequently are not aware that the battery was ingested.

According to the Chairman of the CPSC, "these incidents are preventable and CPSC is working to get ahead of this emerging hazard quickly". Chairman Tenenbaum also stated "our consumer awareness efforts and outreach to the electronics industry are underway". The CPSC recommends the following steps to prevent unintentional battery ingestion:

- Discard button batteries carefully;
- Do not allow children to play with button batteries, and keep button batteries out of your child's reach;
- Caution hearing aid users to keep hearing aids and batteries out of the reach of children;
- Never put button batteries in your mouth for any reason as they are easily swallowed accidentally;

- Always check medications before ingesting them. Adults have swallowed button batteries mistaken for pills or tablets;
- Keep remotes and other electronics out of your child's reach if the battery compartments do not have a screw to secure them. Use tape to help secure the battery compartment.

The battery compartments on toys and musical books are required to be fastened by a screw, but this precaution is not mandated for remote controls and other electronic items intended for adults. On June 9, 2011 a proposed Button Cell Battery Safety Act of 2011 was introduced by Senator Jay Rockefeller. This new law, if enacted, will require warning labels and a more secure battery compartment on all household products, not just toys. This extra level of security will lessen the risk of children removing batteries or having the batteries accidentally fall out if a product is dropped.

I have been asked to investigate several cases involving button batteries where children have accidentally ingested them, resulting in significant injuries. In the midst of a trauma, the battery or the product that the battery came from is often discarded or destroyed before it can be inspected by an expert. In most states, a product liability claim cannot be pursued if the product is not available for inspection and retained in the same condition that it was in at the time of the accident. In order to prevent other children from becoming injured by the same product, the item should be retained and a report should be made to the CPSC.

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