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Parents Warned to be Aware of the Dangers of Button Batteries

A doctor at Royal Manchester Children's Hospital is calling for parents to be aware of the dangers of button batteries which may be fatal to their children.

Lithium button batteries that are used to power toys, key fobs, remote controls, birthday cards etc. can cause severe life changing injury or death in young children.

Dr Kate Parkins, Consultant in Paediatric Intensive Care says: "There have already been two reported deaths in the Greater Manchester area directly linked to children swallowing these batteries so it's important parents are aware of the serious harm they can cause. Children under six years old are most at risk, but severe injury can happen in any age group. Most serious cases are associated with Lithium button batteries larger than 20 mm (the size of a 10p piece). These can get stuck in the throat or gullet (oesophagus) and this is where the battery can cause the most harm in as little as two hours."

"Repair can require feeding and breathing tubes and multiple operations. Parents need to be aware there may be no symptoms at first or that symptoms may be similar to other illnesses (eg coughing, drooling, not eating or drinking normally, tummy pain). Children can usually breathe with the battery in their throat so it may be difficult to spot."

"The button battery does not need to be bitten, damaged, crushed or leak to cause harm. New button batteries are most likely to cause harm (especially Lithium button batteries), but even those that no longer work can cause serious injury. When the battery gets stuck it causes injury by setting up an electrical current when in contact with lining of the throat or gullet (oesophagus). This causes a build-up of caustic soda (sodium hydroxide) and can cause a severe burn. Damage can occur if the button battery is not removed in less than two hours, and is more likely to cause severe injury if it is not removed within 8-12 hours."

Parents are advised to:

1. Keep devices with button batteries out of reach if the battery compartments aren't secure, and lock away any loose batteries.
2. If a child swallows a button battery take them straight to the nearest Accident & Emergency Department. Do not let them eat or drink and do not try to make them sick. In Accident & Emergency doctors will check whether a button battery is stuck in the throat or gullet (oesophagus) using an X-ray.
3. If a child gets a button battery stuck in the nose or ear take them to the nearest Accident & Emergency Department as soon as possible. It is important that it is removed quickly (ideally in less than 2 hours) as the battery can cause permanent damage.

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Notes: Dr Kate Parkins is also Lead Consultant for NWTs (North West and North Wales Paediatric Transport Service) which is a collaborative venture between Royal Manchester Children's Hospital and Alder Hey Children's Hospital.