

Parents be aware this holiday season: Magnets in children's toys pose significant health risk

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While the danger of magnets for children is increasingly recognized, they don't receive treatment for swallowing them as quickly as needed, and parents don't receive sufficient warning on toys, according to a new study.

The Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center work shows that a growing number of adults know about the potential risk of swallowing magnets, but medical complications from magnets continue to be extensive worldwide and throughout childhood. The study – which identified 128 instances of magnet swallowing across 21 countries – published online in the *Journal of Pediatric Radiology*, urges parents to be particularly careful as they decide which toys their children should have and to be aware of deceptively mild symptoms that may indicate a child has swallowed multiple magnets.

"The majority of swallowed magnetic objects were components of toy sets, including many well-known brands," says Dr. Alan Oestreich, MD, professor of radiology at Cincinnati Children's and author of the study. "Many of the children represented in the survey were 5 years of age or younger and dependant on their parents or guardians to ensure they do not have access to multiple small magnets."

The study's findings are especially relevant this time of year as parents and families are shopping for holiday gifts for children. As the focus of

toy safety is top of mind for many shoppers, it is important also to note that toy manufacturers are not required to include written warnings on packaging for toy sets including magnets.

"While many children in the study were under the age of 3, it should not be perceived that the problem is restricted to toddlers," stated Dr. Oestreich. "Because a minority of patients were infants and toddlers, the question of why the objects were swallowed was of interest. The children stated reasons such as 'I thought it was funny' or 'I liked the flavor of magnets' among other reasons."

Additionally, Dr. Oestreich identified the medical or psychological status of a child as a factor in why the child swallowed the magnets. Autism as a known condition was reported in 16.2% of children 4 years old and older. "Not all children will be inclined to swallow magnets, but if a particular child displays tendencies to eat or swallow inappropriate objects, flags should be raised and special attention should be paid to ensuring that toys do not contain any type of magnetic components," cautioned Dr. Oestreich.

Additionally and equally significant, the study found that most children who swallow multiple magnets do not receive treatment quickly enough. Because the symptoms can be deceptively mild and resemble flu-like illness, many parents delay taking children for medical attention. Symptoms including nausea, vomiting, cramps or abdominal pain should be treated as significant, especially if the child is autistic or has other developmental issues. "One should consider requesting a plain radiograph of the abdomen if symptoms are not immediately attributable to an illness and/or the parent suspects the child may have swallowed magnets," Dr. Oestreich says.

If not treated quickly, magnets often stick to each other across bowel wall and can cause significant problems, often leading to infection in the

digestive tract. In nearly every case, surgery or endoscopy was required to remove the magnets and repair damage. One child died of sepsis before any surgery or endoscopy could be performed.

The study, a follow up to research started in 2004, concludes that public education is the best line of defense in preventing cases like those studied here. Manufacturers should make warnings about the dangers and symptoms of magnet ingestion more frequently and more dramatically evident, the study says. But until that time, it is up to parents to know the dangers of magnets and make smart decisions about what to bring into their homes.

Source: Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

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