

Small, high-powered magnets hazardous to kids remain on market

April 17 2013, by Monica Eng

Last summer Kelly Bruski went to the store with her sons to buy a birthday gift for her boyfriend. When the boys, now 6 and 9, chose a magnet desk-toy called Buckyballs, "I saw they were really picking out a gift for themselves," said Bruski, a sales rep in Crystal Lake, Ill.

Bruski allowed her sons to play with the magnets under her supervision but said she stored the set in a cabinet because "I was afraid my little guy Patrick would get into them on his own." Yet it was her older son, Brandon, who wound up in the emergency room in January with sharp [stomach cramps](#) and vomiting.

He'd accidentally swallowed two of the magnets, leaving his small and large intestines bound together by magnetic attraction and ulcerations in his intestinal lining that required emergency surgery.

Following a 2007 Tribune investigation of hazards from magnetic children's toys, standards were put in place to disallow the use of high-powered magnets in toy pieces small enough to swallow. But some medical experts say they have been seeing a growing number of incidents related to adult desk toys like Buckyballs.

Although no one keeps exact records on the problem, one medical group estimated from national [surveillance data](#) on injuries that ingesting magnets led to more than 16,000 emergency room visits by children younger than 18 from 2002 to 2011.

Most of the reported injuries involved "kitchen gadgets or toys," according to the North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition.

Many companies recently stopped making and selling high-powered magnet sets under legal pressure from federal regulators, but billions of the magnets remain in homes, and it's still possible to buy them online.

The U.S. Consumer [Product Safety Commission](#) has lawsuits pending against two manufacturers, Zen Magnets and Star Networks, that continue to sell the magnets, and against the maker of Buckyballs, Maxfield & Oberton, which no longer sells them but has not issued a recall.

On Friday, the commission announced that six major retailers, including Barnes & Noble, Bed Bath & Beyond and Brookstone, are recalling Buckyballs and the square version, Buckycubes, that were bought at their stores and offering various incentives for anyone who returns them.

Created in the early 1980s, neodymium-iron-boron or rare-earth magnets are 10 to 20 times more powerful than more common ferrite magnets. Starting in the middle part of the last decade, they became a popular part in children's toys, until injuries and media coverage prompted sweeping changes in the way magnetic toys could be produced.

One of the most dramatic incidents prompting the changes, and featured in the Tribune series, was the death of Seattle toddler Kenny Sweet Jr., who died in 2005 after rare-earth magnets from broken Magnetix toys cut off the blood supply in parts of his digestive tract, resulting in gangrene.

According to the North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition, [emergency room visits](#)

related to rare-earth magnet toys dropped with the arrival of the new rules on children's toys but started rising again in 2010 when the magnets proliferated in sets aimed at adults.

Although most cases involved young children, teenagers also have been reported to ingest the magnetic balls accidentally when using them to mimic tongue and nostril piercings.

In 2010 the [Consumer Product Safety](#) Commission began working with the makers of executive desk toys to include special warnings on the packages, create educational campaigns and design more child-resistant packaging.

But as ingestion cases continued, the commission filed suit against several companies and in August started developing rules that would govern the design, construction and strength of magnetic products for adults as well as children. A spokesman said no date has been set for finalizing these rules.

Some companies are fighting the efforts of regulators, contending that adults should have the right to buy magnet sets and that better warnings and packaging solutions should be tried.

One of the most outspoken executives is Shihan Qu, of Boulder, Colo.-based Zen Magnets, which still sells the product on its website. Qu said he fears that the current efforts will result in overly broad regulations that will amount to an all-out ban on brands, like his, that he said have never been associated with injuries.

"A lot of magnet companies feel like it is primarily Buckyballs that has gotten us into this because of the way they presented themselves with the colorful products and placing them next to toys and even calling them desk toys," said Qu, who refers to his product as magnet spheres.

Qu is part of a campaign called savemagnets.com that is lobbying Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, who has spoken out about the products' potential dangers, to discuss alternatives to a ban. Gillibrand has not responded to hundreds of letters he and other magnet supporters have sent her office, Qu said. She also did not respond to Tribune inquiries.

"There are so many warnings that haven't been tried," Qu said. "No one has even come out to tell teenagers not to use them to mimic piercings, let alone something like: 'Poison: Put these in your mouth only if you want to die,' which is an exaggeration but there could be something like that."

Qu said that if his products were sold in stores, they would "only be at head shops next to pipes and knives."

A common complaint by magnet-makers is that the [Consumer Product Safety Commission](#) has unfairly singled out their product when items that are actually aimed at children - such as trampolines, skateboards and balloons - injure and kill children every year.

"The trampoline comparison is often used," responds Nancy Cowles of the Chicago-based child safety advocacy group Kids in Danger. "But if I'm a parent and I'm looking at a trampoline, it's very clear to me what the hazards are. ... We can all play that game of what causes more hazards, but that doesn't mean that you don't address the hazards that are right in front of you."

The need for more education and awareness is one thing that unites all parties in the magnet discussion.

"I think we still need to focus on public awareness," said Dr. Jim Berman, an associate professor of pediatrics at Loyola University Stritch School of Medicine who practices at Advocate Children's Hospital and

has treated several cases of magnet ingestion. "The toys seem so innocuous because by themselves they are not particularly toxic or dangerous or sharp. As a result, I think many parents are not aware of the potential hazards."

Berman said he thinks the issue is fairly well recognized among pediatric gastroenterologists but may be less so among general practitioners.

Bruski said that even after emergency room doctors detected metal in her sick son's digestive tract, they sent him home without asking any questions about magnets.

Then she remembered that Brandon - a boy with a habit of chewing on objects - recently had sneaked the box of Buckyballs into school. Eventually he admitted he might have accidentally swallowed one or two.

Doctors performed [emergency surgery](#) to remove the magnets, along with sections of the boy's large and small intestines.

Brandon was released from the hospital a few days after the operation, and his mother said no lasting health effects are expected. Still, she's concerned that something similar could happen to other children with worse outcomes if better safeguards aren't put into place.

Bruski said she did not notice that the Buckyballs carried a warning label until she examined the box closely in the hospital. It said: "Warning: Keep Away From All Children."

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