

Wire bristles from barbecue brushes can cause serious injuries

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While many people view Memorial Day weekend as the unofficial start of the summer grilling season, they may not be aware of the dangers of eating food cooked on grills cleaned with wire-bristle brushes. A new study conducted at the University of Missouri School of Medicine identified more than 1,600 injuries from wire-bristle grill brushes reported in emergency rooms since 2002. Loose bristles can fall off the brush during cleaning and end up in the grilled food, which, if consumed, can lead to injuries in the mouth, throat and tonsils. Researchers advise individuals to inspect their food carefully after grilling or consider alternative grill-cleaning methods.

"Wire-bristle brush injuries are a potential consumer safety issue, so it is important that people, manufacturers and health providers be aware of the problem," said David Chang, M.D., associate professor of otolaryngology at the MU School of Medicine. "If doctors are unaware that this problem exists, they may not order the appropriate tests or capture the correct patient history to reach the right diagnosis."

Chang reviewed consumer [injury](#) databases to determine the number of emergency department visits caused by wire-bristle injuries between 2002 and 2014. He observed that 1,698 injuries were reported by emergency departments in that time. The most common injuries reported were in patients' oral cavities, throats and tonsils, with some injuries requiring surgery.

"One little bristle unrecognized could get lodged in various areas of the

body, whether in the throat, tonsil or neck region," Chang said. "If the bristle passes through those regions without lodging itself, it could get stuck further downstream in places like the esophagus, stomach or the intestine. The biggest worry is that it will lodge into those areas and get stuck in the wall of the intestine. The bristles could migrate out of the intestine and cause further internal damage."

Chang said that the number of injuries found from wire-bristle brushes could be even larger than his 1,698 estimate, since his study did not include injuries treated at urgent care facilities or other outpatient settings. This data could lead to better protective measures from individuals and wire-bristle brush manufacturers, he said.

Chang recommends the following tips for individuals this grilling season:

1. Use caution when cleaning grills with wire-bristle brushes, examining brushes before each use and discarding if bristles are loose.
2. Inspect your grill's cooking grates before cooking, or use alternative cleaning methods such as nylon-bristle brushes or balls of tin foil.
3. Inspect grilled food carefully after cooking to make sure bristles are not stuck to the food.

"If cautionary measures fail and individuals do experience problems with swallowing or pain after eating something that has been barbecued or grilled, they should seek advice from a physician or an emergency department and let the physician know that they were just at a barbecue event or they just grilled food," Chang said.

The study, "Epidemiology of Wire-Bristle Grill Brush Injury in the United States, 2002-2014," recently was published in *Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery*. Research reported in this publication was

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