

Fivefold rise in young children swallowing magnets over past 5 years in UK

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There's been a fivefold rise in the number of young children requiring

treatment after having swallowed a magnet over the past 5 years in the UK, suggests data from specialist doctors in a letter published online in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*.

Nearly half of these [children](#) required surgery to remove the magnet, with [surgical complications](#) after retrieval a common occurrence.

Swallowing '[foreign bodies](#)', such as coins and buttons, is common among young children from the age of 6 months onwards as they explore their environment, which is key to their development. Most of these objects pass out of the body naturally without causing any injury.

But this isn't always the case for button batteries and small neodymium magnets—strong permanent magnets found in cordless tools, [hard disk drives](#), magnetic fasteners, and certain types of children's toy, highlight the authors from The Quadri-South East Paediatric Surgeons (QuadriSEPS) group.

This group comprises four tertiary children's surgical centres in the South East of England: Evelina London Children's Hospital, King's College Hospital, St George's University Hospitals, and the Royal Alexandra Children's Hospital.

Between January 2016 and December 2020, a total of 251 children were admitted to the four centres, after swallowing a foreign body, with a steady increase of 56% in admissions between the two time points.

Coins were the most common item swallowed (93; 37%), followed by magnets (52; 21%), and [button batteries](#) (42;17%).

The number of children who had swallowed a magnet increased fivefold between 2016 and 2020. Some 22 (42%) of those who had swallowed magnets required surgery for retrieval compared with just 1 (2.5%) of

the button battery cases.

Ten out of 251 (4%) children experienced surgical complications after their procedure, with magnet retrieval accounting for 80% (8) of these cases, 4 of which were serious.

In the UK, there's a statutory requirement set out in the The Magnetic Toys (Safety) Regulations 2008, which requires all magnetic toys sold to be accompanied by a warning, but most manufacturers don't display these, point out the authors.

The age limit suitability on these toys is usually specified as 14 years and above, but the average age of the children who had swallowed magnets at the four centres was 7, ranging from 4 months to 16 years.

And while single magnets usually don't require removal, several swallowed magnets have the potential to wreak havoc in the gut, causing intestinal tissue death (necrosis) and perforation, they highlight.

"As a regional network of paediatric surgeons, we are extremely concerned with the recent rise in cases we have seen with foreign body ingestion and, in particular, magnets," write the authors.

"We recommend a strong public health campaign to increase awareness of the dangers of small, powerful magnets, especially those intended for toys, and to work with manufacturers in clearly warning purchasers of the dangers for children," they urge.

More information: Hemanshoo Thakkar et al. Foreign body ingestion in children: a magnet epidemic within a pandemic, *Archives of Disease in Childhood* (2021). [DOI: 10.1136/archdischild-2021-322106](https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2021-322106)

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