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Are button batteries the most challenging product safety problem ever?

On the day a coroner handed down findings on the death of a young Queensland girl, leading consumer product safety consultant, Gail Greatorex, is asking: 'Are button batteries the most challenging product safety problem ever?'

Gail, who runs Melbourne based consultancy Product Safety Solutions, said button batteries are increasingly prevalent in homes and everywhere. The potential for a young child to suffer terrible injuries after swallowing one is alarming.

The challenge: A unique combination

Button batteries present a unique combination of challenges for managing safe products. Button batteries are:

- attractive to children, easy to swallow
- difficult to completely isolate from children
- deadly within days
- found in a staggering array of products
- hard to detect if swallowed
- symptoms similar to other ailments

It's a 'perfect storm'

What's the danger?

There's a hidden danger in lithium button batteries. Unlike just swallowing a coin, when ingested, saliva triggers the batteries to generate an electrical current.

Internal chemical burns can lead to tissue damage which can perforate the oesophagus and cause severe bleeding. Young children, who often put small things in their mouths, are most at risk.

Part of the problem is that the symptoms are similar to ailments like gastro and flu which makes it hard to diagnose. Parents are usually not aware a battery has been swallowed.

A number of children in Australia have died or sustained severe and ongoing injuries after swallowing a button battery.

Fatality of 4 year old Summer Steer

In 2013 Summer Steer was just four years old when she swallowed a battery which got stuck in her oesophagus. Summer died a couple of weeks after the ingestion.

Today in Brisbane, Coroner John Hutton released his [findings](#) into Summer's death.

Coroner Hutton urged a range of actions to tackle the problem without delay. He has made 13 recommendations, for action:

- by manufacturers of button batteries and of products that contain button batteries
- by health and consumer safety agencies across Australia

Gail Greatorex said 'It's going to take awareness and action by suppliers, government and consumers alike to ensure the safety of young children around button batteries. Action is being taken by key agencies but everyone needs to look at ways to help.'

'I urge anyone selling products with button batteries to check them and stop selling if the compartments are not child-resistant.'

Further information

The ACCC's [Product Safety Australia website](#) has a variety of reports and advice on button batteries.

Several videos have been produced to replicate the effect of lithium batteries on human tissue. In this video a button battery is placed inside a sausage and takes no time to do damage: https://youtu.be/0mkJB_H4q8g

Other Australian incidents - In two other notable cases:

- In 2010 Cairns infant, four-month-old Oscar swallowed a 1 cm battery. Just a 14-hour delay in removing the battery resulted in spinal damage and the infant spent eight months in a full-body cast. Now five years old, Oscar can walk but he will have severe restriction of movement for the rest of his life as he is unable to fully raise his head
- In 2015 Victorian toddler Isabella Rees was only 14 months old and died after ingesting a button battery

Gail Greatorex has written an [article](#) on this topic which appears on the Product Safety Solutions website.

About Gail Greatorex

Gail Greatorex is a passionate advocate for product safety and good product design. Gail worked in consumer product safety with the Australian government for 25 years, mostly at the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. In 2012 she set up her own product safety advisory business. Throughout her career Gail has built her knowledge of safety principles, risk management, legal compliance and technical standards.

About Product Safety Solutions

Product Safety Solutions is Gail's business - assisting companies, associations, government agencies, and consumers in product safety and compliance. The business offers guidance in consumer safety standards and bans, product safety compliance, assessing and analysing product hazards, product recall issues, compliance undertakings and other remedies, product testing and certification, technical evidence, and similar business needs.

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