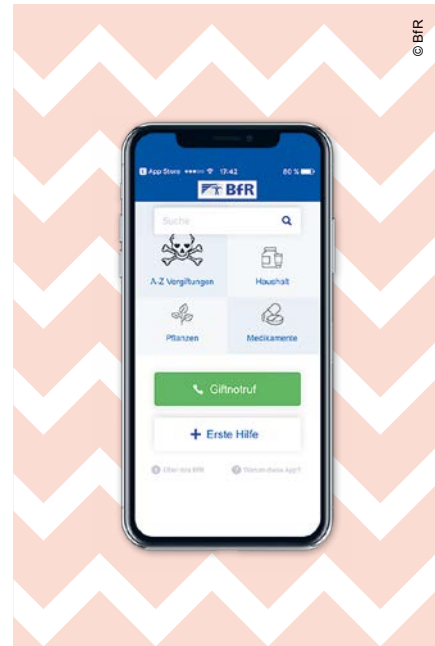


Electrically charged throat

If button batteries are swallowed by children, they can suffer serious damage of their mucous membrane. Parents should keep them far away from their offspring.



© TY Lim/Shutterstock.com



© BfR

It is something that terrifies many parents: a small child swallowing a coin or a marble. Devices that are operated with button cell batteries may also be a source of hazard. If a child swallows a button cell, this can have serious health consequences. Complications are rare if it passes through the oesophagus – in this case, natural excretion under medical supervision is usually sufficient. However, if the battery gets stuck in the oesophagus, parents have to act quickly: contact with the moist mucous membranes causes electrical current to flow. Hydroxide ions formed at the interface between the button cell and the mucous membrane can lead to severe chemical burns. The more electric charge the battery has, the more severe the damage. Lithium button cells are of particular concern since they have comparatively high voltages. Large button cells (over 20 millimetres) also pose a greater health risk as they are more likely to get stuck in the oesophagus.

Off to the children's hospital

How can parents tell if their child has a battery stuck in their throat? At first, those affected often develop no symptoms or show only mild discomfort. After a few hours, vomiting, loss of appetite, fever or coughing occur. The BfR advises immediate examination at

a children's hospital even if there is only a reasonable suspicion that a button cell has been swallowed. This is because as the situation progresses, the tissue in the oesophagus can become increasingly damaged. This leads to bleeding and tissue destruction. Long-term effects may include the oesophagus becoming scarred and narrowed. Swallowing button cells even results in death on rare occasions.

National poisoning register

The number of such cases among children in Germany so far cannot be precisely estimated. According to valuation from poisons centres, several hundred children are affected in Germany each year. Eight poison centres as well as the BfR collect data on poisoning incidents in Germany. The aim in the future is to compile these data in the form of a national poisoning register. Regular comprehensive statistics on poisoning accidents will then make it possible to identify new risks more quickly and to gain a national overview of poisoning incidents. ■

More information:
Press release 43/2018 of 23 November 2018