

Star-Telegram

Tiny toys can mean big health problems

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The Washington Post

Meredith DellPrete, 10, was playing at school one day and did something that she said is popular among kids her age: pretending to have a pierced tongue. The Fairfax County, Va., fifth-grader took two tiny magnetic balls out of her pocket and placed one on top of her tongue and the other on the underside. The magnets, the size of a BB, are extremely powerful. They made it look like she had a tongue stud. She opened her mouth to show a friend.

That's when the tiny silver orbs rolled off.

"I could feel them in the back of my throat. I tried to get them out, but I couldn't. So I just swallowed them," she said last week.

That led to five days at Inova Fairfax Hospital, at least 10 X-rays, three CT scans and an endoscopy. Finally, on Jan. 20, a surgeon used a metal instrument to manipulate the magnets into her appendix, avoiding major surgery. He then removed her appendix and the magnets, doctors said.

They are not only in children's toys but also in jewelry and are marketed as stress-relief toys for adults. The magnets that Meredith received as a gift are a popular brand known as Buckyballs, which are 5 mm in diameter. The labels warn to keep them away from children and not to put them in the nose or mouth; swallowed magnets can cause serious injury or death.

Hospitalized at the same time as Meredith was a 10-year-old boy who had swallowed three ball-bearing magnets. He eventually passed them without incident, doctors said. On Wednesday, a 9-year-old boy, was brought to Inova Fairfax and transferred to Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, a doctor said. The boy's condition could not be immediately determined.

Neither Meredith nor the other 10-year-old suffered serious injury, doctors said.

When two or more magnets are swallowed, they can attract each other internally, resulting in serious injuries such as small holes in the stomach and intestines, intestinal blockage, blood poisoning and even death, according to safety and health officials.

In November, the Consumer Product Safety Commission issued its first product-wide warning about ball-bearing magnets in adult products in a news release with manufacturers. The commission had received 22 reports of incidents involving the magnets from 2009 through October, it said. The actual number is probably higher, doctors said. Inova Fairfax alone had three cases in less than a week.

Although parents of younger children are generally warned about the hazards of small toys, there is less public awareness among parents -- and even medical professionals -- about the risk of magnets, especially when older children use them to emulate tongue or lip piercings, according to parents, doctors and safety officials.

Marsha Kay of the Cleveland Clinic's Children's Hospital said magnet ingestion is increasingly being reported among children in recent years.

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