



American College of Medical Toxicology

Physicians Specializing in the Care of Poisoned Patients

Magnets

What are magnets and where are they found?

Magnets are objects that most frequently contain iron and generate a magnetic field that attracts other iron-containing objects. Magnets come in all shapes and sizes. Magnets may be found in toys, cabinet hardware, decorative items placed on refrigerators, as well as in other objects and locations. More recently, rare earth magnets, which are both small and extremely powerful, have become popular as building toys.

Why are magnets dangerous?

When a single magnet is swallowed, it can become lodged inside the throat, lungs, or esophagus (the tube that connects the mouth to the stomach). This can lead to choking, difficulty breathing, or damage to the area. While a swallowed magnet smaller than a penny will generally pass through a child's digestive system, large, sharp, or oddly shaped items may become stuck.

A much greater danger exists when a magnet is swallowed along with another magnet or piece of metal. When two or more such objects are swallowed, the magnetic attraction can pin the bowel walls together leading to a blockage or tearing of the bowel that is potentially deadly. In 2006, the CDC issued a warning regarding this unique hazard and recommended that children under age 6 should not have access to these items.

Injury may also occur if the magnet becomes stuck in the nose or ear.

What should I do if my child has swallowed a magnet?

If your child has swallowed a magnet or one has become stuck in the nose or ear, take them to a health care facility or call your poison control center at 1-800-222-1222. Do not try to induce vomiting or give food or drink. If the child is experiencing breathing problems call 911.

What symptoms might occur if my child swallows magnets?

There may be no symptoms for a day or two. Flu-like symptoms with nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain may occur when the bowel becomes blocked. If untreated and the bowel wall tears, symptoms may worsen to include loss of consciousness and severe shock. Deaths have occurred as the result of swallowing magnets.

What treatment is provided to a child who swallows magnets?

The treatment is determined by the symptoms the child is experiencing as well as the size, shape, and number of magnets swallowed. The child will most likely have X rays performed prior to decisions about a treatment plan. The treatment plan may range from simple observation to removal of the items, either by a scope or by surgery.

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