

How to Identify Esophageal Obstruction

By Carol Potter, M.D., Associate Professor of Clinical Pediatrics at the Ohio State University and Nationwide Children's Hospital and member of Clinical Advisory Board/CdLS Foundation

Just because a child doesn't eat, doesn't mean they won't swallow things they shouldn't. I have a little friend with CdLS from whom I have removed several swallowed objects from, including batteries, barrettes and hair ties. None of the events were witnessed, or even suspected until several days later.

Symptoms of swallowed foreign bodies are varied, and may not be present. A child may cough or gag if the object is in the esophagus or airway. They may not want to eat or not be able to swallow their secretions. If the object is in the stomach, they may have intermittent vomiting or discomfort. More serious complications such as bleeding or severe infection may occur if the object erodes through the gastrointestinal tract.

Button batteries in the esophagus are an emergency, as they start to cause significant tissue damage within 15 minutes. Another serious ingestion are high powered magnets like "Buckyballs." These dangerous objects were previously removed from the market, but recently returned to stores. The balls are easy to swallow and cause perforation when tissue is caught between two magnets. They should be discarded so children can't play with them.

Foreign bodies can be hard to find if they aren't metal, as they may not show up on X-ray. A variety of diagnostic tests can be performed to detect them, but you need to think about ingestion with unexplained symptoms if you are going to find them.