

# Foreign Bodies (Swallowed Objects)

Infants and toddlers may swallow small objects, such as coins or toys. These foreign objects may become stuck in the esophagus (swallowing tube) and may at first cause symptoms such as choking, gagging, or difficulty breathing. If needed, a procedure can be performed to remove the object from your child's esophagus.

## What do you need to know about swallowed objects?

Infants and toddlers put all kinds of things in their mouths. Most of the time they are swallowed and pass through the digestive tract without a problem. If an object becomes stuck in your child's throat or esophagus (the swallowing tube that leads from the throat to the stomach), it may cause choking, gagging, or difficulty breathing. Even if your child has no symptoms, medical evaluation may be needed.

An x-ray film may be done to see where the object has become stuck. Depending on the situation, the doctor may recommend waiting for a while to see if the object passes into the stomach. If needed, an instrument called an *endoscope* may be used to look into your child's throat and aid in removing the foreign object.

## What types of symptoms occur?

- Your child may suddenly start choking, gagging, or coughing.
- Other symptoms may follow, including:
  - Drooling.
  - Painful swallowing or inability to swallow. Your child may refuse to eat or drink.
  - Vomiting.
  - Pain in the neck, throat, or chest.
- ! Breathing problems may develop if the object is blocking your child's breathing tube (trachea). If your child has noisy breathing or shortness of breath or if his or her skin is turning blue, call 911 or another emergency number.
- Your child may have no symptoms. However, if you saw your child swallow an object, it's a good idea to get med-

ical help, even if he or she doesn't seem to be having any problems.

## What are some possible complications of swallowed objects?

Damage to the tissues of your child's esophagus may occur. This risk depends on the object swallowed and where it gets stuck. Swallowed "button" batteries, such as watch batteries, are a special concern.

## What puts your child at risk of swallowed objects?

- Infants and toddlers between 6 months and 3 years old are most likely to swallow foreign bodies.
- Children who are mentally retarded or have psychiatric problems are also more likely to swallow objects.

## How can you prevent swallowed objects?

With children under age 3, keep all objects that are small enough to go into the mouth—coins, small toys, etc.—out of reach! Make sure food is cut up small enough for your child to swallow easily.

## How are swallowed objects treated?

- Treatment for swallowed objects depends on several factors: what the object was, where it became stuck, and what symptoms it is causing.
- X-rays may be performed to make sure that your child swallowed the object and where it is located. Some objects just don't show up on x-rays and so endoscopy will have to be done.
- ! *Certain objects must be removed immediately*, especially sharp objects and "button" batteries (like watch batteries). Objects causing breathing problems also need to be removed immediately.
- If the swallowed object is something harmless (such as a coin) and it is not causing any problems, the doctor may

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recommend waiting as long as 24 hours to see if it passes into the stomach. If so, the object will pass all the way through your child's digestive system. This avoids the need for any treatment.

- If endoscopy is necessary:
  - An endoscope is a long, flexible tube that is placed down your child's throat and into the esophagus. Through the endoscope, the doctor can see, grasp, and safely remove the swallowed object.
  - Your child will be given an anesthetic or sedative—he or she won't be awake or feel much during the procedure. Another tube will probably be placed to protect the airway.
  - The endoscopy procedure is very safe. As soon as the anesthetic or sedative wears off, your child should be back to normal.

- Depending on your child's situation, other simple procedures may be tried to remove the object. The focus will be on removing the object as quickly and safely as possible.
- After returning home, check to make sure that all objects small enough to go into your child's mouth have been picked up and put out of reach!

#### **When should I call your office?**

Call our office if your child develops any new symptoms after removal of a foreign object:

- Choking, gagging, or difficulty swallowing.
- Swelling or tenderness in and around the neck.

*If your child has noisy breathing or shortness of breath or if his or her skin is turning blue, call 911 or another emergency number.*

