

# Swallowed (ingested) foreign bodies



Children sometimes swallow things such as coins, small toys or beads. Most objects that children swallow are harmless, and are passed through the digestive system and out with the faeces (poo) without any problem.

Sometimes, swallowed objects get stuck in the oesophagus (food pipe) and may not pass into the stomach. In these cases, a doctor will need to remove the object.

A child who has swallowed a magnet or button batteries (e.g. from a toy, watch or calculator) is at risk of catastrophic injury. **If you think a child has swallowed a magnet or button battery, call an ambulance (000 in Australia) or go to your nearest hospital emergency department immediately.**

If you are concerned that your child may have swallowed something poisonous, call Poisons Information Centre (13 11 26 in Australia).

## Signs and symptoms of swallowed objects

Most children have no symptoms after swallowing an object, and the object will not cause any problems.

Occasionally, the swallowed object can become stuck in the oesophagus. **Take your child to a doctor or hospital emergency department if they have:**

- trouble swallowing food
- drooling
- pain in the chest or neck.

Very rarely, the object can become stuck in the stomach or intestines. **Take your child to a doctor or hospital emergency department if they have:**

- ongoing vomiting
- abdominal (tummy) pain
- blood in their vomit or poo
- a fever.

If your child is coughing or is having difficulty breathing, the object may be in their airway or lungs. **You should call an ambulance immediately if your child is having trouble breathing.**

## Treatment in hospital

In hospital, a doctor or nurse will ask what your child has swallowed. An X-ray may be done if the swallowed object is made of material that shows up on an X-ray, or if your child has worrying symptoms.

Depending on what the object is and where it is in the digestive system, the object may need to be removed.

- Some objects can harm the body and may need to be removed urgently. These include button batteries and magnets.
- Objects in the oesophagus often need to be removed. This will depend on your child's symptoms.
- Most objects in the stomach or further along (in the intestines) will pass safely on their own.

## Care at home

If doctors are unable to see a swallowed object on an X-ray and your child has no worrying symptoms, it is OK to take your child home. Observe them for any developing symptoms and take your child back to hospital if they have:

- abdominal pain
- ongoing vomiting
- blood in their vomit or faeces

- fever.

After going home, most children will not need any follow up or further X-rays. There is no need to examine your child's faeces to find the swallowed object.

If your child has swallowed a harmless object and is showing no symptoms, there is no need to seek medical advice unless you are concerned about your child.

## Key points to remember

- Most objects that children swallow are harmless, and pass through the digestive system without any problem.
- **If you think a child has swallowed a button battery or magnet, call an ambulance (000 in Australia) or go to your nearest hospital emergency department immediately.**
- If your child has worrying symptoms, take them to the hospital emergency department.
- Objects that become stuck in the oesophagus, stomach or intestines may need to be removed.

## For more information

- Kids Health Info fact sheet: [Button batteries \(www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact\\_sheets/Button\\_batteries/\)](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Button_batteries/)

## Common questions our doctors are asked

**If the object my child swallowed is sharp, will it cause damage when it passes through their digestive system?**

Even sharp objects like broken glass and pins will most likely pass once they are in the stomach or further along. It is very unlikely that these will cause internal damage once they've passed into the stomach.

Developed by The Royal Children's Hospital Emergency and Surgery departments. We acknowledge the input of RCH consumers and carers.

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