

Small high strength magnets

RoSPA recommends that:

- Magnets are kept out of the reach of children
- Magnets are never placed in or near the mouth or used for fake tongue or mouth piercings
- Further investigation into the availability of such products and whether additional requirements are required in terms of legislation, enforcement or labelling.

What's the problem?

Small high strength magnets can be found in some products like children's toys, adult toys/gadgets and fake tongue piercings. When two or more of the magnets are swallowed, they can stick together causing damage the digestive system. A magnet in one loop of the bowel will be attracted to another in a different loop and pull the two together. This traps parts of the digestive system between the magnets, cutting off blood flow and rapidly killing intestinal tissue. Abnormal holes can be created between intestinal segments causing serious infections, lifelong digestive disorders or even death.

UK injuries from magnets are not reported systematically. However, from just a handful of hospitals and trauma centres RoSPA is now aware of over 200 cases of children requiring hospital treatment since 2019 concern. For example, data has been submitted to RoSPA by one hospital detailing 19 cases over a twelve-month period (commencing in January 2019 and ending in January 2020) where children had ingested magnets. Eleven of the children were over 10 years old and the remaining eight children were under 5 years old. Three of the nineteen cases required surgery.

A group of four hospitals in the South East of England have reported 52 cases over a five-year period between 2016 and 2020. There was a five-fold increase during this period. 42% of these cases required surgery.

Further data has emerged from hospitals across the country, which have mirrored these findings and demonstrated that there is a significant problem for these two key age groups. NHS England have been in touch about cases that have been reported to them from hospitals around the country and RoSPA is in contact with a paediatric surgeons who report seeing "a rising number of cases" of the older age group requiring treatment. One surgeon reports having seen three together in one weekend. We are also aware of three cases that required surgery in one hospital in London, where children had been using magnetic beads to create necklaces and swallowed a number of magnets.

What action has been taken?

The Toy Safety Regulations 2011 made under the Consumer Protection Act 1987, require toys to be safe. They prescribe Essential Safety Requirements regarding general principles including design, construction and



composition, and also address particular risks. The harmonised European Standard EN 71 provides the recognised interpretation of the legal requirements. A toy is defined as a product that is designed or intended (whether or not exclusively) for use in play for children under 14 years of age. Small high strength magnets are often sold as adult toys/gadgets and carry warnings. Toys containing them are also frequently marketed as STEM toys. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) based toys promote education, creativity and problem solving skills in children.

The General Product Safety Regulations 2005 require all products to be safe in their normal or reasonably foreseeable usage. The regulations therefore impose controls on other types of consumer goods containing magnets. The requirements apply to adult toys/gadgets or products marketed as fake tongue piercings.

In May 2021 The Office for Product Safety and Standards issued a Product Safety Alert reminding businesses and online platform of their obligations under product safety law. They must remove from the market products containing small magnets which breach the safety requirements of the Toy Safety Regulations or the General Product Safety Regulations. More details can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-safety-alert-issued-for-small-high-powered-magnetic-products>

Also in May 2021, NHS England released a safety alert which asks health service providers to ensure any patients who have ingested (or are suspected of ingesting) 'super strong' magnets are referred to an Emergency Department as a medical emergency. In addition, organisations with an Emergency Department are asked to ensure the right processes are in place so that any child or adult seeking emergency care having swallowed these magnets receive the necessary urgent assessments, investigations and treatments. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2021/05/urgent-assessment-treatment-following-ingestion-of-super-strong-magnets/>

It is worth noting that some other countries like Australia and New Zealand have banned small high powered magnets that meet specific criteria in terms of size, strength, marketing and use. The bans were introduced in 2012/2013 as a result of several deaths and numerous injuries to children across the world.

A national focus group with membership from RoSPA, Trading Standards, the British Retail Consortium and the Office for Product Safety and Standards has been set up to consider options for further action in terms of product safety and raising awareness. Members of the working group with an enforcement remit and policy development are currently investigating the availability and marketing of products and are exploring options relating to stricter market surveillance and other control measures, including labelling. RoSPA intends to integrate the safety message regarding keeping magnets out of children's reach, into existing awareness raising resources that already address the risk from button batteries. Further work has also been carried out to identify specific cases and integrate their experiences into a prevention campaign to highlight risks to under five year olds and also to older children. Other actions in progress including the following:

- The sourcing of information from UK paediatricians in terms of fake magnetic piercings
- The organisation of focus groups of children aged 11 to 14 years old in Northern Ireland to determine awareness of the risks and communication methods for peers. This will specifically address the issue of fake magnetic piercings.

What needs to happen?



RoSPA is continuing to gather information on prevalence and incidents. It is anticipated that more injuries are likely to occur from magnets in products like toys, gadgets and fake tongue piercings, which is why RoSPA recommends that:

- Families are made aware of the need to ensure magnets are kept out of the reach of children
- Older children and their families are made aware that magnets should never be placed in the mouth and should not be used for fake tongue or mouth piercings
- Further work is undertaken to explore whether product safety legislative requirements are fully effective and whether more measures need to be put in place.

Further information

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