

Parent Plus: Water-absorbing beads can be harmful if swallowed, put in ear

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Water-absorbing gel beads look like candy so children may be tempted to swallow them. Water-absorbing gel beads sold as children's toys and used in vases and gardens are a growing problem among young children.

The non-toxic water beads are called jelly beads, water orbs, hydro orbs, polymer beads and gel beads. When the tiny hard plastic balls are placed in water, they can grow up to 200 times their size. The clear colorful beads can be dried out and reused.

Because they look like candy, children may be tempted to swallow them. Children also have put them in their ears.

"These particular objects can grow bigger as they pass through the intestines, ultimately paving the way for obstruction," said Jenifer Lightdale, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, a pediatric gastroenterologist. The beads may not be visible on X-rays.

In February, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) was notified about two incidents in which a 5-year-old and 7-year-old placed beads in their ears. Their doctors could not see the clear beads and thought the children had an ear infection. The children were treated with antibiotics and eardrops, but this did not resolve the symptoms. Doctors finally discovered the problem after the beads had expanded to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch and had to be removed surgically. Both children have ear drum damage, and one has permanent hearing loss.

Since 2012, several children have required emergency care after swallowing beads. Last year, a 2-year-old girl swallowed about 100 small water beads. The beads expanded to the size of marbles, and it took nine hours for her to pass them in the emergency department. Another child had surgery to remove a now recalled water-absorbing ball that could grow to the size of a racquetball.

In 2012 and 2013, deaths of children overseas and injuries in the U.S. prompted the CPSC to issue a voluntary recall of several types of water-absorbing balls, beads and toys shaped like fruit and animals (<http://bit.ly/1WLS5C0> and <http://bit.ly/21us7WP>). Similar products still are sold in craft stores and garden centers.

Signs that swallowed beads are causing a blockage may include refusing to eat, drooling, vomiting, wheezing, complaints that something is stuck in the throat or chest, abdominal pain, constipation, abdominal

swelling and soreness. If you suspect your child swallowed or placed water beads into their ears, seek treatment right away.

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