

Messaging Guide: What the Public Needs to Know about Water Beads

It is vital that direct, clear, and consistent messaging is used when warning about the dangers of water beads. Many people inaccurately believe water beads are not hazardous and will dissolve if they are lodged in the airway, are swallowed, or go down the drain. Due to the social connotation of the word “non toxic”, misleading advertisements, and unregulated labeling term usage, the term ‘non toxic’ should be avoided when discussing the dangers of water beads unless to raise awareness about its lack of regulation.

We can all agree adult supervision, careful attention to a child’s environment, and researching products are important safety factors. But, as product safety advocates we must remember that adult supervision and clean houses will not make inherently unsafe products safe. The impression that water bead injuries are prevented by individual actions like watching children more closely or better housekeeping undermine the intended safety message and should be avoided. For water bead injuries, the language of conventional injury prevention and advocacy is ineffective. It inadvertently leads the public to blame negative outcomes on individual failures rather than the unsafe product. As a result, the public is more likely to ignore safety recommendations and point the finger of blame at parents and even the young innocent victims of dangerous products.

Water beads hide easily in carpet fibers, under furniture, appliances, and in other toys. They shrink down to the size of a pinhead when dehydrated, are often transparent when fully hydrated, and can be swallowed, aspirated, or inserted into the nose or ear very quickly even when an adult is looking directly at the child. Overconfidence in the effectiveness of adult supervision in preventing water bead injury, not only by parents but teachers and therapists, can delay help being sought, diagnosis, and treatment. Caregivers may believe they avoided disaster only to discover later when the child develops symptoms that a water bead was in fact ingested, aspirated, or inserted. The best way to prevent water bead injuries is for the beads not to be used in homes with children and pets. A water bead ingestion, insertion, or aspiration requires prompt medical attention. Early identification and diagnosis of water bead ingestion, aspiration, or insertion is key to avoiding devastating complications and to decrease healthcare costs to families and insurance companies.

Offer caregivers ideas for safe edible alternatives to use for sensory play like jello, tapioca pearls, crushed cereal, rice, pasta, flour, marshmallows, brown sugar, cream of wheat porridge for the sand etc.

The following language is effective at reducing water bead injuries and motivating caregivers to take action when they suspect a water bead incident has occurred...

- **The best way to prevent water bead–related harm to kids and pets is to avoid using them in the first place.**
- **Water beads do not always appear on Xray or CT and on ultrasound they can look like cysts... small beads can be missed**
- **Research has shown age restriction and parent observation are ineffective at preventing water beads injuries.**
- **Early diagnosis of water bead ingestion, aspiration, or insertion is key to prevent complications and decrease healthcare costs.**
- **Most often, a caregiver will have no idea their child has swallowed, inserted, or aspirated a water bead because these incidents happen so quickly, they can occur even when the parent is looking directly at the child**
- **Around 30% of water bead incidents have been found to occur while the child was at school.**
- **Non toxic is an unregulated term.**
- **Water beads are not toys.**
- **Water beads can be toxic.**
- **Water beads are dangerous.**
- **Just one water bead can kill**

