

December 16, 1992

CHILD-PROOF THE HOUSE FOR A SAFE, HAPPY HOLIDAY

DALLAS--Dear Santa, please give parents what they really need for the holidays--a refresher course in injury prevention. Christmastime can be very dangerous for infants and children. Not a creature is stirring, but preventable injuries are waiting to happen all through the house. Not just tiny toys or parts of toys, but hard candies and party nuts, Christmas tree light bulbs, miniature ornaments and many other items around the house present choking hazards for small children, according to Dr. Robert Wiebe, emergency medicine specialist and professor of pediatrics at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

Each year hundreds of American children under age 5 choke to death on food and other items. Infants and toddlers are especially at risk for choking, primarily because they put everything in their mouths.

Because the holidays can be hectic, it's often difficult to keep an eye on children at all times. So Wiebe encourages parents to look for and eliminate choking hazards and other potential causes of injury.

"Even more dangerous than your own home can be the homes of relatives who aren't used to having small children in the house," said Wiebe. "Family gatherings that allow older children to mix with very young ones can be dangerous too. The older children may have toys with tiny removable pieces on them."

Accidental poisoning is another serious seasonal hazard. Many household items can be poisonous, and because children spend more time indoors during the winter, they are more apt to come in contact with these items.

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Wiebe encourages parents to survey the house for dangerous items and put them out of reach. He said that focusing on prevention can eliminate many of the dangers that exist around the house; however, he believes that every parent should take an annual refresher course on child safety. The American Red Cross, the American Heart Association and many area hospitals offer classes throughout the year that teach parents what to do when confronted with a choking infant or child.

Some of the holiday items that can cause choking or poisoning include:

- * hard candies, nuts or party foods such as hot dog slices
- * miniature batteries
- * foam packing pellets
- * marshmallows
- * garland
- * Christmas tree ornaments and light bulbs
- * holly and poinsettia berries, real or artificial
- * tiny toys or pieces from toys
- * deflated balloons
- * decorative pine cones
- * furniture or silver polish
- * medicines and vitamins

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.