While tales of poisonous candy and razor blades hidden in apples are about as true as the spookiest of ghost stories, there are still plenty of dangers lurking around Halloween that can send kids to the emergency room.

And this year – with around 41 million trick-or-treaters expected – could prove particularly treacherous: Halloween falls on a Saturday, when children tend to stay out later and more drunken drivers are likely to be on the roads.

The nature of the holiday alone can make it perilous, as children wear loosefitting costumes they can trip over, candles glowing inside of pumpkins can cause fires and sharp props – think sticks or plastic swords – can cause eye injuries. Then, of course, there’s pumpkin carving, which can cause finger and hand injuries.

But of all dangers, car accidents are among the most common, and one doctors say families do not think about enough. Children are more than twice as likely to be killed by a car while walking on Halloween night than at any other time of the year, according to the organization Safe Kids USA.
“This is a time when we see an increase of kids being hit and killed by cars,” says Dr. Rebecca Parker, chairwoman of the American College of Emergency Physicians’ board of directors.

Parker, who is also a practicing emergency physician in the Chicago area, says most accidents occur between 4 p.m. and 10 p.m. — particularly as the sun sets, because drivers have a difficult time seeing where they’re going.

Dr. Leticia Manning Ryan, who specializes in pediatric emergency medicine and is an injury researcher at the Johns Hopkins Children’s Center in Maryland, says she and her colleagues anticipate pedestrian injuries every year around Halloween. And it’s not always the fault of drivers: Children might be wearing masks that make it difficult for them to see when they cross the street, or they could trip on loose costumes.

And again, this Halloween could be worse than most. A report released last week by Alcohol Monitoring Systems — a company that provides alcohol testing technologies for the criminal justice field — showed that when Halloween falls on a Saturday, drinking violations skyrocket by 4.5 times compared with the average increase when Halloween falls on any other day of the week. Data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration also show that between 2009 and 2013, 43 percent of all motor vehicle deaths occurring on Halloween night resulted from a drunken driving-related crash. In addition, 26 percent of pedestrian fatalities on Halloween involved a drunken driver in 2013.

Dr. Sarah Denny, an attending physician in the emergency medicine division at Nationwide Children’s Hospital in Ohio, says Halloween falling on a Saturday can also increase the likelihood that parents are drinking and less likely to supervise their children as they cross the street or roam the neighborhood.

Most accidents, she says, do not occur in crosswalks.

“A lot of it is the excitement of what’s going on and people are less careful,” Denny says.

Even parents’ efforts to make sure their children can be seen in the dark have the potential to backfire. Dr. Henry Spiller, director of the Central Ohio Poison Center at Nationwide Children’s, says kids have gone to the emergency room after ingesting the liquid inside glow sticks that are worn on their wrists or around their necks so they will be visible to drivers in the dark. Children can also break glow sticks, splashing the liquid into their eyes and causing a burning sensation.

“We know it’s going to happen,” Spiller says. “It’s very common.” Though he estimates about 800 children head to Nationwide Children’s each year for glow stick-related injuries, he says not all of them need to go to the hospital. In some cases, parents should instead call poison control.

Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., also recently called attention to another potentially hazardous substance: face paint. In a letter he wrote to the Food and Drug Administration, Schumer asked the agency to do more to test makeup and face paint used for Halloween costumes. In particular, Schumer said in a statement, products made in China can contain heavy metals like lead, nickel, cobalt and chromium, which can be dangerous to children.

Spiller says lead is of particular concern if ingested, because it slowly travels from the gut into the bloodstream and the brain, and can cause damage weeks or even a month later.

Emergency departments also see burn victims around Halloween, Ryan says. According to the National Fire Protection Association, decorations were the item first ignited in an estimated average of 920 reported home structure fires per year from 2007 to 2011. The blazes also caused an estimated average of six civilian deaths, 47 civilian injuries and $12.9 million in direct property damage each year.

As for candy-related injuries, most are connected with choking, Ryan says. Though she hasn’t come across any problematic candy in her career, she still encourages parents to check trick-or-treating bags at the end of the night.

Of the urban legends about poisonous candy, Spiller says: “It turns out there was a great deal of fear, and little substance to the fears.”


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