

# Poisoning

Poisoning is a common and often serious emergency in children. Poisoning most often occurs when toddlers and preschoolers find poisons in the home and eat or drink them. If you have an infant or toddler, you need to “poison-proof” your home and make a plan for what to do if poisoning occurs.

## What types of poisoning occur in children?

The average home contains many products that could cause poisoning in a young child. Many common medications can be harmful when taken in large doses. Infants and toddlers are at risk of poisoning because they love to explore their environment and will put almost anything in their mouths.

- ! • *If you have an infant or toddler, it is essential to “poison-proof” your home so that your child cannot find and eat or drink anything harmful. All potential poisons must be locked up!*

Some common and dangerous household poisons include medicines, cleaning and chemical products, and auto anti-freeze.

- ! • *Always get medical advice before attempting any treatment for poisoning!* For some types of poisons—especially caustic substances such as drain openers—you should *not* induce vomiting. If your child eats, drinks, or inhales something that may be poisonous, call 911 or another emergency number.

## What does it look like?

- Poisoning symptoms depend on what type of poison your child has taken. Often, there are no symptoms—the parent just discovers that a child has drunk or eaten a possible poisonous substance.
- Possible symptoms include:
  - Nausea and vomiting.
  - Very fast or very slow breathing.
  - Confusion, behavior changes.
  - Changes in the pupils (the black part of the eye); they become dilated (large) or constricted (small).
  - Extreme sleepiness or unconsciousness.
  - Burns around the mouth.
  - Coughing or choking.

## What puts your child at risk of poisoning?

- *Crawling infants and toddlers are at highest risk!* Most poisonings occur in children under age 5.
- Poisoning is much less common at ages 6 and older. Teenagers may poison themselves in suicide attempts or while attempting to get “high.”
- *Not poison-proofing your home!* Ninety percent of poisonings in children occur at home.

## How can poisoning be prevented?

- Poison-proof your home by putting away all medicines, household cleaners, and other possible poisons. All of these products should be locked up or put away where your child cannot see or find them. (Remember, toddlers love to climb!)
- Teach your child never to put anything but food or drink into his or her mouth. Never tell your child that medicine is “candy.”
- Buy medicines with childproof caps. (Remember, grandparents may have medicine bottles without safety caps.) Keep medicines in their original containers.
- *Have a plan in case poisoning occurs!*
- Get medical help as soon as possible. Call our office or the Poison Help Line (1-800-222-1222).
- Don’t make your child vomit, *unless* you are told to do so by a doctor or the poison control center. Some poisons may cause more damage if your child vomits.

## What are some possible complications of poisoning?

The harmful effects of poisoning depend on what type of substance your child has taken, along with other factors such as how much was taken, when it was taken, and your child’s age and size. Some poisons and common medications taken in large amounts can cause serious complications are:

- *Acetaminophen* (brand name: Tylenol, among others). Widely used as a “safer” alternative to aspirin but may cause severe liver damage.
- *Aspirin*. May also cause abnormalities of body salts (electrolytes) or blood clotting. (Use of aspirin is generally not recommended in children because it may lead to Reye’s syndrome, a disease involving brain swelling and liver damage.)
- *Antidepressants*. Can affect the nervous system causing drowsiness, coma, and seizures. They can also cause heart and breathing problems.

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- *Clonidine*. Sometimes used for attention deficit–hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) treatment. Dangerous poisoning can occur at relatively low doses, causing breathing problems and coma.
- *Corrosive products* (for example, drain openers, bleach, or any kind of acid). Can seriously damage the esophagus (swallowing tube), skin, or eyes. Do not induce vomiting!
- *Antifreeze* (ethylene glycol). A common cause of poisoning because it tastes sweet. Causes organ failure if not treated, including seizures, kidney failure, and coma.
- *Insecticides* (organophosphates or carbamates). Can cause nervous system damage.
- *Hydrocarbons* (such as refrigerants). Can cause lung damage if inhaled.
- *Plants*. Many house plants and wild plants are potentially toxic.

### How is poisoning treated?

If you think your child may have been poisoned, get medical help immediately. Call your regional poison control center (1-800-222-1222), or call 911. Don't wait for symptoms to occur. Be prepared to provide as much information as possible about the substance your child was exposed to.

- For swallowed poisons, do not give syrup of ipecac or anything else to induce vomiting unless instructed to do so by the poison control center or a doctor.
- For inhaled poisons, get the child to fresh air as soon as possible.
- If poison has gotten on the skin or in the eyes, rinse with lots of fresh water for several minutes.

*Home treatment:* Your child may be managed at home, depending on the dangers of whatever he or she was exposed to. For example, although some kinds of medicines are very dangerous, others are unlikely to cause serious poi-

soning. If your child is managed at home, you'll be given specific instructions on when to seek emergency medical care.

- If your child develops new or unexpected symptoms, get medical advice immediately.

*Hospital treatment:* If your child has been exposed to a dangerous poison or has overdosed on certain medicines, he or she will need to go to the hospital. There he or she may undergo various types of treatment, including:

- Activated charcoal may be given to absorb the poison from your child's stomach. This may be given as a "slurry" drink or placed in your child's stomach through a nasogastric (NG) tube. This is a small tube placed down the nose and into the stomach.
- The NG tube may be used to remove the poison from your child's stomach. This is called gastric lavage, or stomach pumping.
- Treatments to help eliminate the poison. For certain poisons, a treatment called dialysis may be used to filter the poison from the blood.
- Blood tests. Blood and urine tests may be performed to measure the amount of poison in your child's body and how it is affecting the organs and blood salt (electrolyte) levels.
- Supportive care. Other treatments may be needed to support your child while the poison is eliminated. If breathing is severely affected, your child may need to be connected to a machine to help with breathing (mechanical ventilation).
- If the poisoning was part of a suicide attempt, psychiatric care may be needed.

### When should I call your office?

Call the regional poison control center (1-800-222-1222) any time you think your child may have drunk or swallowed any type of poison.