

Protecting Your Family from Poisons

Gayle Whitworth

Poison control centers receive more than 2 million poisoning calls each year. Almost 90 percent of these poisonings occur in the home. The majority of non-fatal poisonings occur in children younger than six, and poison-related deaths are highest among adults. A simple understanding of what poisons are, how they enter the body and where they can be found, plus knowing what to do in the event of an unintentional poisoning are keys to keeping your family safe.

A poison, simply stated, is anything that makes you sick or hurts you. Poisons enter the body through the eyes, skin, mouth, and nose and through stings or bites from insects or animals. Poisons come in the forms of medications, household and personal care products, pesticides, plants, insects and animals, and environmental hazards. A brief understanding of these poisons and how to treat unintentional poisonings follows.

Medications are attractive to young children with their bright colors, pleasant smells and forms that often resemble candy or their favorite drinks. Medications should be kept high and out of the reach and sight of children, and when possible, caps should be child-resistant. Medications should be left in their original, labeled container and should be properly disposed of when past the expiration date. When dispensing over-the-counter medications, be sure to read and follow the Drug Facts label. This label gives such information as what the active ingredient is, what it is used for, how much and how often to give it, and any warnings. Knowledge of the active ingredient is especially important when giving multiple medications, as it helps to avoid overdosing. It's also important to use the dispensing tool that came with the medication, to check the directions three times and to ask the pharmacist or doctor any questions you may have before dispensing. And remember, never share prescription medications.

Household and personal care products are usually abundant in the home. From cleaning products and paints to cosmetics and mouthwash, the potential for poisoning is high. Household and personal care products should be kept in their original containers with labels intact and out of the reach of children. Most products will have a label indicating the active and inactive ingredients, human safety information, and what to do in case of accidental poisoning. Signal words, indicating the degree of hazard for a product, include danger, caution, warning, and poison.

Pesticides, like household products, present a high potential for poisoning. Pesticides should be stored in a shed or locked cabinet at least four feet off the ground. Dry products should be stored above liquid products. When using pesticides, toys, children and pets should be removed from the area until the pesticide has dried. Baits and traps should be placed in locations where young children cannot reach them. Pesticide labels will contain warning and caution statements and what to do in an emergency and should be read and used as indicated.

Many of the plants we have in our landscapes and home have an irritant or poisonous affect. Knowledge of what plants are in your surrounding is important to keeping your family safe. To learn more, go to: [Poison](#)

[Plants and Creatures](#). When purchasing plants, try to choose those that are non-toxic or that offer a low level of toxicity, and always teach your children to not put any part of a plant in their mouths.

Insects and animals are various and abundant, and most kids are drawn to them. As with plants, it's important to teach children to be cautious around them. Many insects and animals can cause harm through stinging, biting or spitting. These can cause reactions such as itching, blisters, irritation of eyes, and breathing difficulties. To learn more, go to: [Poisonous Plants, Stinging Insects, Venomous Spiders, Snakes](#) or [Poisonous for Pets](#)

Environmental hazards, such as lead and carbon monoxide, also pose potential threats for poisoning. Lead is a highly toxic metal that was used for many years in products found in and around our homes. Lead poisoning can cause brain, liver, and kidney damage, slowed development, learning or behavior problems, lowered intellect (or IQ), hearing loss, and restlessness, and stops good vitamins, such as iron and calcium, from working right. Children six years old and under are most at risk because their bodies are growing quickly. If you suspect lead poisoning or live in a home built before 1978, it's important that you have your child tested. To help combat the effects of lead, feed children healthy, low-fat foods high in calcium, iron, and vitamin C.

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colorless, odorless, poisonous gas. It is produced by the incomplete burning of solid, liquid, and gaseous fuels. Appliances fueled with natural gas, liquefied petroleum (LP) gas, oil, kerosene, coal, or wood may produce CO. Symptoms of CO poisoning are similar to those of the flu, without the fever. CO alarms should be installed in every home according to the manufacturer's instructions. The Consumer Product Safety Council recommends that one CO alarm be installed in the hallway outside the bedrooms in each separate sleeping area of the home. CO alarms may be installed into a plug-in receptacle or high on the wall because CO from any source will be well-mixed with the air in the house. Make sure furniture or draperies cannot cover up the alarm. Prevent CO buildup in the first place by making sure heating appliances are in good working order and used only in well-ventilated areas.

If an unintentional poisoning occurs, it's important that you know what to do. The most important step is to remain calm. If the victim is unconscious, has trouble breathing or is convulsing, call 9-1-1. If the victim is conscious, is breathing okay and is not convulsing, call the Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222. Keep this number posted on or beside each phone in your home, or program it on your speed-dial.

If a poison is swallowed, do not give anything by mouth until advised by the Poison Control Center, and do not induce vomiting unless told to do so. If a poison is in the eyes, hold the eyelids open and wash quickly and gently with clear running water for 15 minutes. Do not use eye drops, chemicals or drugs in the water. If a poison has been inhaled, carry or drag the victim to fresh air immediately, and loosen any tight clothing. If the victim has stopped breathing or the skin is blue, perform artificial respiration and call 9-1-1. If a poison comes in contact with the skin, take off wet clothing and rinse the skin for 15-20 minutes in the shower or under a faucet. Call the poison control center. If necessary, call 9-1-1. Finally, always remember to follow the safety information on the label of any product that contains a poison.