

Accidental poisoning in children

Emergency Department factsheets



What is accidental poisoning?

Accidental poisonings involve a person, usually a young child, 'accidentally' poisoning themselves without wanting to cause harm to their body (as opposed to intentional poisoning or overdose).

This is most common in young children as they are keen to explore their world and often learn about new things by putting them in their mouth. Most children do not know that swallowing poison can be harmful. A sour or bitter taste does not deter a child from swallowing a poison, especially medications in tablet or capsule form that may look like 'lollies'.

Poisoning mostly occurs in children under the age of three, especially boys. They are too young to know the difference between what is safe and what is dangerous.

Children are naturally curious and often explore closed rooms and cupboards.

What causes accidental poisoning?

Most poisonings happen at home. Often the substance is in sight, ready to be used, but unattended by an adult. At other times, children have climbed up high to get something they are interested in, or opened closed cupboards.

Many household items can be poisonous.

- **Medications:** paracetamol, cold and flu remedies, cough syrup, mouthwashes, vitamins, herbal remedies, antiseptics, antibiotics, sedatives, anti-depressants, heart medications and more.
- **Cleaning products:** detergents and cleaning sprays, bleaches, washing machine and

dishwashing powder, room deodorants, drain cleaners, methylated spirits and turpentine.

- **Cosmetics:** nail polish and remover, ointments, shampoos, hair dyes, perfumes and aftershaves.
- **Other products:** alcohol, cigarettes (if eaten), illicit drugs, essential/aromatic oils, pesticides, car products, glue, batteries, pool chemicals, paints and thinners, and gardening products.
- **Poisonous plants:** oleander, datura, arum lily, fox glove. Berries, mushrooms and plants with coloured leaves can be attractive to children and harmful.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms will depend on what your child has swallowed; the amount they have swallowed; and their general health. Some poisons cause only minor symptoms, while others may cause:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Drowsiness
- Tummy pain
- Burns or damage inside the mouth and food pipe (*oesophagus*).

Some poisons are highly toxic and only a small amount can cause serious problems including fits (seizures), respiratory or cardiac arrest (where the child's breathing or heart stops), unconsciousness (coma) or death.

Treatment

Different treatments are available, depending on the poison.

- Activated charcoal – this substance stops the body absorbing the poison, but must be given within one hour of your child swallowing the poison for it to be effective. It does not work with every substance.

- Observation – some poisons have a delayed effect and your child may have to stay in hospital, possibly overnight.
- Monitoring – of heart rhythms and checking other vital signs such as blood pressure and oxygen levels.
- Bloods tests – to check the level of poison in the blood. This helps decide further treatment. In most cases the level is very low and no problems are expected.
- Antidote – can be given for some poisons to reverse the effects.
- Admission – a few children need further treatment in hospital. The Poisons Information Centre (phone 13 11 26) may be contacted for advice. A child who has swallowed a poison will not be made to vomit unless advised by the Poisons Information Centre.

What to expect

Should your child become ill at any point, return to the emergency department or contact your local doctor. Children who have taken a poison are at risk of doing it again.

Ensure all the poisons in your house and garage are locked away and out of reach of children.

First aid

If you suspect your child has been exposed to or has swallowed a poison, call the Poison Information Center for first aid advice (even if symptoms have not developed). It is open 24 hours a day.

Poison Information Centre Phone 13 11 26

- Do not try and make your child vomit unless advised to do so by the Poisons Information Centre.
- If you are told to go to the emergency department, take any containers (spray bottle, pill container, plant etc.) with you.

Prevention

Simple safety measures are the best way to make sure your child cannot get access to poisons.

- When buying medications, household chemicals and garden products, choose childproof containers if possible. Ask for pills and tablets in blister packs and foil strips.
- Put all poisons out of reach of children after using or buying them.
- Use child resistant locks on cupboards containing poisons.
- Always read the labels of all medications and follow the instructions when giving medication to your child.
- Do not confuse children by talking about pills and liquid medication as 'lollies'.
- If you take pills, do so out of sight of children.
- Keep handbags out of reach of children.
- Discard old medications, batteries and poisons. Your local council can advise you where to dispose of them.
- Store poisons and medications in their original containers.
- Never put poisons in drink bottles.
- Keep children away from the dishwasher and close it after putting dishes in.
- Parents and caregivers should consider doing a first aid course.
- Do not grow poisonous plants.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

See your local doctor or health care professional if your child has gastro and:

- Has any sign of dehydration (see 'Follow-up')
- Is younger than six months
- Has tummy pain that is getting worse
- Has blood or mucous in their diarrhoea
- Has more than eight to ten bowel motions (diarrhoea) in a day, or diarrhoea lasting ten days or more
- You are worried for any other reason.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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