

Child poisoning in the home - symptoms and treatment

Accidental poisoning is common, especially among young children aged between one and three years. Children explore their environment as part of their natural development. They learn about new things by playing with them – trying to open containers, mimicking what they see adults do, putting things in their mouth and so on. A child may also be poisoned if they are given the wrong medicine or wrong dose of medicine.

In most cases, a child is exposed to poison without knowing that it may be harmful. Young children do not know the difference between what is safe and what is dangerous. Parents and carers must take responsibility for making the home safe for children.

If you suspect a child has been exposed to a poison, do not wait for symptoms to occur. Call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately for advice.

How poisoning can occur

Poison may be swallowed, spilt on the skin, sprayed or splashed in the eye or inhaled. Most poisonings involving children happen at home, but they can also occur while visiting friends and family or while on holiday. Often, the substance is left within sight, ready to be used but left unattended.

Visitors' bags may be left within the reach of children, which is a problem if they contain medicines or other poisonous substances. At other times, children may climb up high to get something they are interested in. Sometimes, parents and carers underestimate their child's climbing ability. Plants or mushrooms in the home garden may also present a poisoning risk to your child.

Poisoning may be a medical emergency

If you suspect a child has been exposed to a poison – whether swallowed, spilt on the skin, splashed in the eye or inhaled – or if a child has been given the wrong medicine or wrong dose of medicine, phone the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately.

If the child or anyone else has collapsed, stopped breathing, is having a fit or is suffering an anaphylactic reaction, immediately ring triple zero (000) for an ambulance. Do not ring the Poisons Information Centre in an emergency.

Some common household poisons

Many medications and everyday household items can be poisonous, including:

- **Medicines** – such as pain-relieving medication, diabetes medicines, iron tablets, sedatives, heart and blood pressure tablets.
- **Cleaning products** – such as bleaches, dishwasher powders, oven cleaners, drain cleaners, methylated spirits and turpentine.
- **Other household products** – such as essential oils, pesticides, herbicides, some car products and gardening products.
- **Poisonous plants and mushrooms** – poisonous plants include oleander, datura and foxglove. Some plants with berries and coloured leaves, which are attractive to children, may be harmful. There are also some poisonous mushrooms or fungi that typically grow in autumn and winter. The Victorian Poisons Information Centre website has a list of poisonous plants that are best not to grow in places where children may have access to them.

Symptoms of poisoning

If your child has had a significant poisoning, any symptoms that develop will depend on a number of factors, such as which medicine or chemical is involved and how much the child has been exposed to.

Symptoms of poisoning may include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Drowsiness
- Tummy pain
- Fitting.

Do not wait for symptoms to appear

If a child in your care has been or may have been poisoned or given the wrong medicine or wrong dose of medicine, do not wait for symptoms to occur. Ring the Poisons Information Centre immediately on **13 11 26** from anywhere in Australia, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Always check with the Poisons Information Centre, even if you are not sure whether your child has been poisoned or not.

Do not try to make the child vomit. This can do more harm than good.

The Poisons Information Centre will get a brief history from you about what happened and will provide the appropriate advice. Many poisoning exposures in children are mild and can be safely managed at home – staff from the Poisons Information Centre will tell you what to do. You may be advised to take your child to your local doctor or hospital.

Treatment in hospital for poisoning

If your child requires a trip to hospital, treatment there may include:

- Blood tests
- Activated charcoal (to bind some drugs so the body can't absorb them)
- An antidote (for some poisons)
- Admission for close observation
- Repeat tests.

Preventing poisoning

The best protection against poisoning is to make sure that children do not have access to any poisons or medicines. Some tips include:

- Check your home to make sure that all poisoning risks have been removed. Ask other people who care for your child, such as grandparents, to do the same.
- Store all medicines, cleaning or gardening products and household chemicals out of children's reach, preferably in a locked cabinet.
- Avoid distractions when administering medicines and follow the dosing instructions on the label. Parents and carers should establish a 'checking system' with each other to avoid giving double doses of medicine to children.
- Contact the Victorian Poisons Information Centre for general first aid advice and tips for preventing poisoning in your home.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Victorian Poisons Information Centre Tel. 13 11 26 – seven days a week, 24 hours a day – for advice when poisoning or suspected poisoning occurs, and poisoning prevention information

- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Your doctor
- Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre (Vic) Tel. (03) 9345 5085
- Kidsafe Victoria – Child Accident Prevention Foundation Tel. (03) 9251 7725
- Your local council.

Things to remember

- Accidental poisoning is most commonly a problem in young children.
- Most poisonings happen at home, but they can also happen while visiting friends and family or while on holiday.
- Check your home to make sure that a child has no access to medicines or poisons and ask other carers to do the same.
- Always double check before giving medicine to children.
- If you suspect your child has been poisoned or given the wrong medicine or the wrong dose of medicine, ring the Poisons Information Centre immediately on 13 11 26.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Austin Health - Victorian Poisons Information Centre

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