
Poisoning and child safety

Summary

- 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.
 - It is easy for parents and carers to underestimate the ability of young children to reach medicines or chemicals.
 - Keep all poisons, especially things you use every day, such as medicines, drain cleaners, oven or grill cleaners, bleach, and dishwasher machine powder, well out of reach of children.
 - Always double check before giving medicine to children.
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Accidental poisoning is common, especially among toddlers aged between one and three years.

Children explore their environment as part of their normal, natural development. They learn about new things by playing with them – trying to open containers, mimicking what they see siblings or adults do – and by putting things in their mouth. Swallowing a poisonous substance, spilling it on the skin, spraying or splashing it in the eye or inhaling it can all lead to poisoning.

A child may also be poisoned if they are given the wrong medicine or a wrong dose of medicine. Always double check the age and dosage instructions before giving medicine to children.

Young children do not know the difference between what is safe and what is dangerous. It is your responsibility to make your home safe for children. Do not assume that your child can understand safety messages. Telling a child a product is dangerous is not enough to protect them from poisoning.

If you suspect a child has been exposed to a poison, or given the wrong medicine or the wrong dose of medicine, do not wait for symptoms to occur. Call the **Poisons Information Centre** (Tel. **13 11 26**) immediately for advice.

How child poisoning can occur

Most poisonings involving children happen at home, but they can also occur while visiting friends and family, or while on holiday.

Poison may be swallowed, spilt on the skin, sprayed or splashed in the eye or inhaled.

Children are often poisoned by substances left unattended and easily accessed in places such as:

- on a bench or table, ready to be used
- in visitors' bags (for example, medicines)
- in bedside tables.

But don't assume that high cupboards provide safe storage, as children learn to climb to get to things. A locked cabinet is the best storage option.

Plants or mushrooms in the home garden may also present a poisoning risk to your child. The Victorian Poisons Information Centre has a **[list of plants that are poisonous](#)** and that are best not to grow in places where children may have access to them.

High-risk times for child poisoning

Children are most likely to get hold of medicines or poisons:

- when they are being used
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- when they are left out to use later
- when the child's routine is changed, such as when visiting someone's home, when moving house or when on holidays.

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** (Tel. **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.

Common poisons around the home

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. There are also some poisonous mushrooms or fungi that typically grow in autumn and winter. The **Victorian Poisons Information Centre website** has an information sheet that lists **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
- falling over
- abdominal pain
- fitting.

Do not wait for poisoning symptoms to appear

If a child in your care has been or may have been poisoned, given the wrong medicine or wrong dose of medicine, do not wait for symptoms to occur. Ring the **Poisons Information Centre** (Tel. **13 11 26**) immediately. 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:

- admission for close observation and monitoring of vital signs such as blood pressure, heart rate and

respiratory rate

- blood tests
- an antidote (for some poisons)

Poison-proofing your home

The best protection against poisoning is to make sure that children do not have access to any poisons or medicines. Some safety 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 in a locked cabinet. If you carry medicines in your handbag, make sure the bag is kept out of reach of children.
- Store household chemicals such as cleaning or gardening products out of children's reach, preferably locked away.
- 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.
- Store poisons out of reach and out of sight, including those stored in the refrigerator, particularly if it is a brightly coloured liquid.
- Don't underestimate a child's ability to climb and reach things.
- Check the child-resistant cap is working on medicine and cleaning containers, and make sure the cap is shut properly after use.
- Avoid taking medicines in front of your children (they may think you are having something nice and copy you).
- Never refer to medicines as 'lollies'.
- Always keep your dishwasher door locked.
- Don't leave paintbrushes to soak in mineral turpentine within your child's reach.
- Keep your own and visitors' handbags out of your child's reach.
- Never transfer chemicals or cleaning products to another container, especially food or drink containers.
- The **Victorian Poisons Information Centre** website has 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** – for advice when poisoning or suspected poisoning occurs, mistakes with medicines, drug overdoses, bites/stings/envenomation by snakes, spiders, bees, wasps, etc. and poisoning prevention information (24 hours, 7 days)
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Royal Children's Hospital Community Information** (formerly Safety Centre) (Vic) Tel. **(03) 9345 5085**
- **Kidsafe Victoria** – Child Accident Prevention Foundation Tel. **(03) 9251 7725**
- Local council

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

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