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## Chemicals in the home

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### Summary

- Most people's homes are filled with chemicals that may be toxic.
  - Toxic chemicals are in many products that you use every day.
  - To keep them safely, store chemicals in sealed containers with proper labels.
  - Make sure chemicals are stored out of reach of children.
  - When you no longer need a chemical (or a product that contains chemicals), dispose of it safely.
  - Not all chemicals can go in your regular rubbish.
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Your home probably contains products and materials that are potentially dangerous. Do you know what to do if someone is poisoned?

**The Victorian Poisons Information Centre** (Tel. **13 11 26**) received 41,410 calls in 2017 – an average of 113 calls per day. Of this total, 85 per cent were calls about exposure to a poison; and 18,485 related to children under 15 years.

Some people who are poisoned end up in hospital, and some die. So, it pays to know what chemicals are in your home, and how to prevent an accidental poisoning.

### Watch out for these chemicals in your home

You may already know that some common household products contain potentially dangerous chemicals. These products include, among others:

- cleaning agents such as bleaches, dishwasher powders, oven cleaners, drain cleaners and turpentine
- pest control products

- weed killers
- gardening products
- swimming pool chemicals
- liquid petroleum gas (LPG).

Many medications such as analgesics (pain relievers), diabetes medicines, iron tablets, sedatives, heart and blood pressure tablets can be dangerous if taken incorrectly.

While an adult may know not to swallow these products (or to swallow medicines only in the prescribed dose), **a child might think they are safe to touch or eat or drink.**

You and your family can live safely with these chemicals around your home if you store them safely (away from children) and use them correctly.

### **Storing chemicals safely at home**

Store and use all chemicals according to the instructions on the packaging. Remember, chemicals may be toxic or flammable, and they may create a poisonous gas or liquid when mixed.

Remember to always keep chemicals in their original containers, never in cups or soft drink bottles.

#### **11 safety tips for storing chemicals in your home**

- Before you buy a product, read the label. Before you use a product, read the label and then follow the instructions for use.
- Try to find the least dangerous product that will do the job, especially if there are children in the house.
- Keep chemicals in a locked cabinet out of the reach of children (including children who are good climbers!). If you can, keep liquid chemicals away from (or below) dry chemicals.
- When you use a chemical product, follow the instructions. Make sure you have the recommended protective equipment (such as gloves, safety goggles and a face mask), and work in a well ventilated area.
- If you are using chemical cleaners, wash the cleaning rags before you use them again or before throwing them out.
- Keep chemicals in their original packaging, so you can easily identify them. Do not keep chemicals in:
  - containers that the product may react with or cause to degrade
  - unlabelled containers
  - containers that originally stored a different product (particularly a food or drink product)
  - containers that cannot be sealed.
- If you have to repackage a product, make sure it is clearly labelled.
- Do not use chemicals for anything other than their intended job. When you are finished with a chemical do not pour it down the drain, toilet or gutter.
- Follow any special storage instructions (for example, keeping flammable liquids away from heat, keeping medicines in a cool place, and keeping acids away from alkaline products).
- Check regularly that storage containers are not damaged or leaking, especially if you are storing chemicals for a long time.
- You are legally required to store pesticides in their original containers, and those containers must meet the **labelling requirements for poison.**

### **Disposing of household chemicals safely**

Some household chemicals must not be thrown into your regular rubbish. The following chemicals need special disposal:

- ionisation type smoke alarms – these are slightly radioactive. You can throw out these alarms in your household rubbish, unless you have a large quantity (more than 10). In that case, call your local fire station for advice
- rechargeable batteries – return rechargeable batteries to your supplier, or to a battery recycling facility, such as that provided by your council

- single-use batteries – recycle single-use batteries too. ALDI supermarkets have battery recycling bins
- lead acid batteries – take lead acid batteries to your council's waste station
- fire extinguishers – return fire extinguishers to your local fire station
- distress flares – check with the manufacturer for advice on how to dispose of distress flares
- medications – return old, expired or unwanted medications to your local pharmacist for proper disposal.

Your local council's household chemical collection is also a chance to dispose of chemicals, used motor oil, paint, solvent, LPG canisters and rechargeable batteries. You can take these products to council waste stations too.

Remember, don't throw chemicals in the toilet or down the drain. And, if you have empty chemical containers, wrap them before you throw them out.

If you are unsure what to do with any household chemicals, call your council's environmental health officer. You can also check out the advice from **Sustainability Victoria** (Tel. **1300 363 744**).

### **What to do in a chemical emergency**

If you think you have been poisoned by chemicals, or that someone else has, look for the following symptoms:

- vomiting
- stomach pains or diarrhoea
- confusion or inability to think
- headaches or blurred vision
- breathing difficulties
- drowsiness and fainting
- fitting
- stinging eyes, skin or throat
- burns or redness (particularly around the mouth, if the poison was swallowed).

Poisoning can look like other conditions – such as a seizure, drunkenness or drug use, a stroke or an insulin reaction – so look for clues that may indicate poisoning. You may find empty pill bottles or packages, or burn marks or stains on furniture or the floor. Or you may detect a chemical smell.

If you are worried about a child, check whether they could have drunk poison from a container, applied medicated patches or swallowed a button battery.

Even if you can't find proof of poisoning, **call 000 for an ambulance immediately if the person:**

- has collapsed
- is losing consciousness
- is in severe pain
- is vomiting profusely
- is fitting
- is struggling to breathe
- is suffering an anaphylactic reaction.

If the person is stable and breathing normally, call the **Victorian Poisons Information Centre** (tel. **13 11 26**). The call line is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

For your call, have the following information ready:

- the person's symptoms
- the person's age and weight
- any medications that the person is using
- the poison that you think is involved, and what you know about that poison (try to have the container with you)
- how much poison was swallowed, and how long ago.

### **Poisoning – what to do while waiting for help**

If someone has swallowed poison, DO NOT try to make them vomit. Clean out the person's mouth with your fingers if the poison is a solid. If the poison is a liquid, clean out a child's mouth with a wash cloth, or an adult's mouth with water – but get them to spit it out, not swallow. If the poison is a household cleaner or other chemical, follow the label instructions for dealing with accidental poisoning.

**If someone has poison on their skin**, put on gloves and then remove their clothing. Rinse the person's skin in a shower or with a hose, for 15 minutes.

**If someone has poison in their eye**, gently flush the eye with cool or lukewarm water for 10–15 minutes or until help arrives.

**If someone has inhaled poison**, move the person into fresh air.

Whatever the form of poisoning, the person may start to vomit. In this case, try to keep them upright. If they have to lie down, turn their head to the side so they don't choke.

The person may also begin to lose consciousness, or stop breathing. In this case, begin **CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation)**.

### **Other safety precautions around chemicals**

Other safety precautions around chemicals include:

- If you think a chemical is at risk of exploding or causing fire, move away from it immediately. Don't waste time saving any property – just find a safe place and call 000 (fire brigade) from there.
- If a chemical has toxic fumes, stay upwind from it, in a ventilated space.
- If someone has been poisoned and you have called 000, follow the 000 emergency operator's first aid instructions. The first aid advice on the container label may be out of date or inappropriate.
- If someone has been poisoned, do not get them to eat or drink anything unless told to by a medical professional.

### **Where to get help**

- In an emergency, call 000 (ambulance or fire brigade) – for emergency help
- **Victorian Poisons Information Centre** Tel. **13 11 26** – for 24-hour advice
- **The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre** Tel. **(03) 9345 5085**
- Your local fire station – for advice on disposal of flammable chemicals
- **Your council** – for advice on disposal of chemicals
- **Sustainability Victoria** Tel. **1300 363 744** – for disposal of chemicals (and other queries).

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

Austin Health - Victorian Poisons Information Centre

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