

The How and Why of Childhood Poisoning

More than half the calls received by most poison centers across the country involve children under the age of six. Usually these poisonings result in mild or no symptoms, but there is potential for severe injury or even death.

Most often, children are poisoned in their own homes. The top four reported reasons why children accidentally poison themselves are listed here:

1. Poisons are not stored properly. Commonly used products left in the open where they can be seen are the number one reason children get poisoned. For example, leaving recently used medication bottles in site on a counter or table. This usually occurs in the kitchen, family room or bathroom. The caretaker's knowledge of product toxicity, income, social background or caretaker's support network did not make a difference in this situation. Bottles on the counter or table, purses or diaper bags sitting on the floor, opened cleaning products left unattended for "just one second," can all lead to poisonings.
2. Children are curious. Children are naturally curious about the taste, smell and texture of products. Children may be interested in the mechanics of a spray container. By swallowing, smelling or spraying a product children learn more about it. By smelling, touching, and tasting, they learn about the world. Brightly colored liquids, spray containers, pills, leafy or flowering plants attract children.
3. Children think a poison is something other than a poison. Because they look similar, children can think fuels, cough syrup, and shampoo are actually liquids that are safe to drink, such as fruit punch or soft drinks. Children may also think the odor of a product is similar to a liquid that is safe to drink. Many poisons look or taste similar to other things. Medicine tablets look and taste like candy. Antifreeze tastes sweet. Red mouthwash looks like fruit punch.
4. Children imitate the behavior of adults. Children copy what their parents or grandparents do, such as taking medication, drinking colored liquids, clean house, and spray chemicals.

When a child is poisoned, usually more than one of the above causes has occurred. However, by preventing just one of the above causes, poisonings can be stopped. For example, an adult may decide to store products, especially those used on a regular basis, in a safe location. Another may teach children that poisons can look and smell like something safe. Adults need to decide which safety measure can be easily incorporated at home, leading to a safer environment. Hopefully, by better understanding why childhood poisonings occur they can be prevented.

*Brayden RM, MacLean WE, Bonfiglio JF, Altermeier W. Behavioral Antecedents of Pediatric Poisonings, *Clinical Pediatrics*. 1993;32:30-35.



This article is from the Minnesota Poison Control System in Hennepin County. For more information checkout their website at www.mnpoison.org

If you have a poison emergency, call this number: 1-800-222-1222