

## **The Elderly and Poison Prevention**

*Reprinted with permission from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Poison Control Center*

---

*Hello, Poison Center? I think I may have taken my medicine twice this morning by accident. I can't remember. Can you help me?"*

*"Poison Center? My throat feels like it's burning! I reached for the toothpaste in the dark and it turned out to be my arthritis rub. The labels look almost the same."*

*"I placed my medicine and my husband's medicine on the kitchen counter. He thought it was meant for him and took both of our medications!"*

*"Hi, I'm calling from a payphone. We were driving to a picnic when my mother drank what she thought was apple juice. But it wasn't apple juice, it was antifreeze I had in the back of the car. Now she's drowsy and her speech is slurred. What should we do?"*

Many people have the impression that poisonings happen only to children. In fact, the Poison Control Center receives over 1,000 calls a year regarding accidental poisonings in adults, many of whom are elderly.

The Elderly Are More Sensitive to Certain Poisons Than Younger Adults. This population is also prone to accidental exposures for unique reasons. The elderly population uses more medications than any other age group. Some elderly people have more than one health care provider who prescribes medication for them. Remembering to take two or more medications a day, with different schedules, side effects and restrictions may

become confusing and frustrating.

The elderly may also undergo certain changes in their bodies that make them more susceptible to poisonings. Near vision tends to decline with age, making it more difficult to read small print labels. Night vision declines as well; therefore, trying to read labels in dim lighting may lead to errors. The sense of taste also changes, and the ability to distinguish subtle flavors diminishes. If something does not taste "quite right," it may now take several mouthfuls to detect. Lastly, while long-term memory improves, short-term memory becomes less reliable, making it easier to forget whether or not medication has been taken. Some illnesses, like Alzheimer's, make patients even more prone to memory loss and may also cause confusion.

## **Preventing Poisonings**

- Develop good communications with your primary physician, nurse, and pharmacist. It is important to notify your health care provider(s) about all medication being taken, including those prescribed by other practitioners, over-the-counter products and herbal or natural remedies. Different medicines may interact with each other and impact on your health.
- It is equally important for you to be knowledgeable about your medication. Asking questions about proper dosing, side effects, drug interactions, and food and alcohol restrictions may prevent therapeutic errors. Report any side effects from the medications to your health care provider as soon as possible.
- If for any reason medication cannot be taken as prescribed, it can often be changed to something more suitable. However, do not stop taking

medication or change the dose without first consulting a physician.

- If you skip a dose, do not take an extra dose without first discussing it with a physician.
- Pharmacists can be good sources of information about medication. Use the same pharmacy consistently so that your pharmacist can get to know your medical history before answering any medication-related questions. Large print labels and child-resistant caps can reduce the risk of accidental poisoning and are available in pharmacies by request.
- Make it a habit to read labels on medications and household cleaning products prior to their use. Take medicine, gargle and brush teeth in adequate light. Using tubes and bottles in the dark may lead to mix-ups.
- Wear your glasses when taking medicine and using household products. These simple precautions may prevent pointing a spray the wrong way, combining products that should not be mixed or simply using the wrong thing.
- Keep products in their original containers. Never store non-food products in food containers.
- Check expiration dates on old bottles and dispose expired products.
- Never share medicines! Just because a medication worked well for one person does not mean it will work well for another.
- Use medication reminders. Use a medication diary or calendar to keep track of dosing schedules. Hang the calendar in the area where the medication is

administered, and mark it every time a dose is taken. Accurate records will remind you of your last dose, and make it easier for your health care provider to evaluate your medication therapy.

- Pill dispensers can also be used as medication reminder tools. However, separating pills from their original container may raise questions about their identity, as well as expose them to light and moisture. Therefore, fill a pill dispenser with only one week's supply of medication at a time.

Although the majority of accidental poisonings in the elderly can be handled at home by calling the poison control center, occasionally a trip to the emergency department or hospitalization may be required. Practicing prevention will decrease the risk of a serious exposure in the elderly and in individuals of any age.