

factsheet

poisoning

This factsheet presents background information mainly for people working with children and families, and students undertaking projects.

More advice on preventing poisoning can be found in **capt's** leaflet *What might poison your child?* written for parents and carers. A sample of this leaflet can be downloaded from **capt's** website www.capt.org.uk, where you can also find out how to purchase bulk supplies.

A complete list of **capt's** resources – leaflets, booklets, posters, guides, etc – can also be found at this website together with details of how to obtain them.

How many children are unintentionally poisoned?

In 2002 in the UK, the last year for which A&E attendance data are readily available:

- almost 31,500 children aged under 15 went to hospital after suspected poisoning – over 26,000 of these were under five years old
- about 7,000 children under 15 were admitted to hospital, a very high proportion of admissions when compared with other types of accidents. The great majority of admissions were for one day or an overnight stay.
- 69% of the admissions were associated with medicines – a quarter of these being commonly used drugs such as analgesics.

Fatal poisonings are thankfully very rare – in 2007 there were none in the UK.

Babies and toddlers learn about the world around them by touching and tasting. This means they are likely put anything in their mouths and are therefore at risk of poisoning.

What types of substances can be harmful to children?

Medicines are responsible for many suspected poisoning cases. Painkillers are the most frequent cause of poisoning but children have also been taken to hospital after swallowing tranquillisers, anti-depressants, vitamins and sleeping pills.

Household and garden chemicals can also be harmful if swallowed. Everyday products such as bleach, disinfectant, dishwasher powder and other cleaning products can cause burns to the mouth, throat and stomach and may also be highly toxic. Glues, solvents and aerosols can cause burns or sickness if they are inhaled.

Alcohol can be very dangerous for young children. Cigarettes and tobacco can also cause sickness if eaten and should be kept well out of the reach of young children.

Cosmetics can be poisonous to young children. Products such as perfume, nail varnish remover and hairspray can be harmful if swallowed and many have a high alcohol content.

Essential oils can also be poisonous if swallowed.

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How can poisoning accidents be prevented?

As toddlers put anything and everything in their mouths, it is necessary to make sure that they do not have access to poisonous substances. Household chemicals and medicines should be stored out of the sight and reach of young children – preferably in a locked cupboard. Garden or DIY products should also be kept in a locked shed or cupboard.

Accidents have happened when adults have put medicines in the fridge. The labels on medicines often state that they should be kept in a cool place. This means away from heat sources such as radiators or direct sunlight. It is confusing for children if products that are not safe to eat or drink are kept in the fridge or in cupboards where food is normally kept.

All medicines or household chemicals should be kept in their original containers. This helps children both children and adults recognise dangerous substances. Warning labels and instructions are vital for using products safely.

Child-resistant closures are also very important as they have significantly reduced the number of childhood poisonings since their introduction. It is important however to be aware that they are child-resistant, not child-proof and that many four or five year olds can undo these tops. Child-resistant caps work by slowing down rather than preventing a child's access to dangerous substances.

Some household chemicals are sold with a bittering agent, such as Bitrex®, in them. This makes them taste extremely unpleasant so that if children do get the substance in their mouth, they are likely to spit it out immediately.

What should you do if a child swallows something that might be harmful?

It is a good idea for parents and others who care for babies or young children to learn basic first aid.

If a child may have swallowed something poisonous, it is important to get advice from a doctor, hospital or by contacting NHS Direct in England (0845 46 47), NHS 24 in Scotland (08454 24 24 24) or NHS Direct Wales (Galw Iechyd Cymru) (0845 46 47).

Do not try to make the child vomit.

If taking a child to the doctor or hospital, take the bottle, packet or any remaining pills with you.

For advice on first aid training contact:

British Red Cross
44 Moorfields
London EC2Y 9AZ

Tel: 0844 871 8000

www.redcross.org.uk/firstaid

St John Ambulance
27 St John's Lane
London EC1M 4BU

Tel: 08700 104950

www.sja.org.uk

Royal Life Saving Society
River House
High Street
Broom B50 4HN

Tel: 01789 773994

www.lifesavers.org.uk

St Andrew's
St. Andrew's House
48 Milton Street
Glasgow G4 0HR

Tel: 0141 332 4031

www.firstaid.org.uk

Further information

The statistics used in this factsheet are drawn from a number of sources. The government's Home and Leisure Accident Surveillance System that collected information throughout the UK from 1978 was closed down in May 2003. Enquiries should be directed to Information Centre, Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Edgbaston Park, 353 Bristol Road, Birmingham B5 7ST, email: infocentre@rospa.com, fax: 0121 248 2001, tel: 0121 248 2066.

Copies of the Annual Reports of the Home and Leisure Accident Surveillance System can be downloaded from <http://www.ndad.nationalarchives.gov.uk/CRDA/58/DD/1/detail.html>. The reports for 1998 – 2002 inclusive can be downloaded from <http://www.hassandlass.org.uk/query/reports.htm>. Visit www.hassandlass.org.uk to interrogate the database for 200-2002 yourself.

Factsheets with detailed information on a variety of accident topics can be found on the Child Accident Prevention Trust website, www.capt.org.uk or can be provided by post on receipt of a stamped address envelope and a list of the subjects you require.

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CHILD ACCIDENT PREVENTION TRUST Canterbury Court (1.09) 1-3 Brixton Road LONDON SW9 6DE
t 020 7608 3828 f 020 7608 3674 e safe@capt.org.uk www.capt.org.uk

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