

# Accidental Drug Poisoning, Pediatric

An accidental pediatric drug poisoning happens when a child takes too much of a substance, such as a prescription medicine, an over-the-counter medicine, a vitamin, a supplement, or an illegal drug.

The effects of drug poisoning can be mild, dangerous, or deadly. Even a small amount of a substance, such as 1–2 pills, can be dangerous for a child.

## What are the causes?

Common causes of this condition in children include:

- Taking too much of a substance by accident. This is the most common cause of accidental poisoning in children.
- Receiving an adult dose of a substance.
- Using more than one substance at the same time.
- Unknowingly taking medicines or substances that interact with another medicine.
- An error made by:
  - The health care provider who prescribed a medicine.
  - The pharmacist who filled the prescription.
  - A caregiver who gave medicine to the child.

## What increases the risk?

Your child is more likely to develop this condition if he or she:

- Is 6 years old or younger. At this age, children are often attracted to colorful pills.
- Has a caregiver who takes more than one prescription medicine.
- Has multiple health conditions or takes multiple medicines.
- Has a mental health condition.

## What are the signs or symptoms?

Symptoms of this condition depend on the substance and the amount that was taken. Common symptoms include:

- Behavior changes, such as confusion, agitation, or not acting normally.
- Sleepiness.
- Slowed breathing.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Seizures.
- Changes in eye pupil size. The pupils may be very large or very small.

If there are signs and symptoms of very low blood pressure (*shock*) from drug poisoning, emergency treatment is required. These signs include:

- Cold and clammy skin.
- Pale skin.
- Blue lips.
- Very slow breathing.
- Extreme sleepiness.
- Loss of consciousness.

## How is this diagnosed?

This condition is diagnosed based on:

- Your child's symptoms. It is important that you and your child tell the health care provider about:
  - All the substances that your child took.
  - When your child took the substances.
  - All substances your child may have access to in the home. If you can, bring any substances or bottles with you to show the health care provider.
- A physical exam, which may include:
  - Checking and monitoring your child's heart rate and rhythm, temperature, and blood pressure (*vital signs*).
  - Checking your child's breathing and oxygen level.
- Blood tests.
- Urine tests.

## How is this treated?

This condition may require immediate medical treatment and hospitalization. Supporting your child's vital signs and your child's breathing is the first step in treating drug poisoning. Treatment may also include:

- Giving medicines by mouth or through an IV to help balance electrolytes or to block or reverse the effect of the substance that caused the drug poisoning.
- Inserting a breathing tube (*endotracheal tube*) in the airway to help your child breathe.
- Passing a tube through your child's nose and into his or her stomach (*NG tube* or *nasogastric tube*) to remove contents from the stomach.
- Filtering your child's blood through an artificial kidney machine (*hemodialysis*).

Depending on many factors, your child may also be given medicine to absorb any drugs that are in his or her digestive system.

## Follow these instructions at home:

### Medicines

- Give over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your child's health care provider.
- Always ask the health care provider about possible side effects and interactions of any new medicine that your child starts taking.
- Keep a list of all medicines that your child takes, including over-the-counter medicines. Bring this list to all of your child's medical visits.



### General instructions

- Have your child drink enough fluid to keep his or her urine pale yellow.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your child's health care provider. This is important.

## How is this prevented?

- Store all medicines in safety containers that are placed out of the reach of children. Dispose of medicines safely.
- Follow directions carefully when giving your child medicine. Call your child's health care provider if you have questions.
  - Read the drug information that comes with your child's medicines.
  - To measure liquid medicines, always use the oral syringe or medicine cup that came with the bottle. **Do not** use household teaspoons or spoons because they may be different sizes and give you the wrong measurement for a dose of medicine.
  - Talk with your child's health care provider before you give any over-the-counter medicines to a child who is younger than 2 years old.
  - **Do not** give over-the-counter cough and cold medicines to children who are 6 years old or younger.
- Make sure your child understands the importance of adult supervision when taking medicines.
- **Do not** give or allow your child to take medicines that are not prescribed for him or her.
- Keep the phone number of your local poison control center near your phone or on your cell phone. Have your child do this, too, if he or she has a cell phone.

## Contact a health care provider if:

- Your child's symptoms return.
- Your child develops new symptoms or side effects when he or she takes medicines.

## Get help right away if:

- You think that a child may have taken too much of a substance. Call your local poison control center. In the United States, the hotline of the American Association of Poison Control Centers is (800) 222-1222.
- Your child is having symptoms of drug poisoning.
- Your child has signs and symptoms of shock. This may include:
  - Cold and clammy skin.
  - Pale skin.
  - Blue lips.
  - Very slow breathing.
  - Extreme sleepiness.
  - Loss of consciousness.

**These symptoms may represent a serious problem that is an emergency. Do not wait to see if the symptoms will go away. Get medical help right away. Call your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.). Do not drive your child to the hospital.**

## Summary

- An accidental pediatric drug poisoning happens when a child takes too much of a substance, such as a prescription medicine, an over-the-counter medicine, a vitamin, a supplement, or an illegal drug.
- The effects of drug poisoning can be mild, dangerous, or even deadly.
- Even a small amount of a substance, such as 1–2 pills, can be dangerous for a child.
- If you suspect drug poisoning, get help right away. Call your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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