Fundamentals of First Aid: Poisoning

What’s at Stake?

Poisoning, accidental or intentional, causes significant harm or death to many US and Canadian people. Poisoning takes many forms as harmful chemicals can be breathed in, swallowed, touched or injected.

What’s the Danger?

Many chemicals that cause poisoning are safe at lower or prescribed levels. They only become dangerous if the exposure to them is inappropriate, such as drug overdose.

Gases such as carbon monoxide are particularly dangerous as their presence is undetectable to humans as it has no color or smell.

Children, especially, are prone to poisoning from household products and alcohol poisoning.

Many accidental overdoses happen because people take daily maximum doses of Acetaminophen (you may know it as Panadol or Tylenol) as well as a cold remedy. Many of these cold remedies also contain Acetaminophen, so people do not realize they are double dosing on Acetaminophen, which causes serious side effects and even death.

How to Protect Yourself

First aid for poisoning:

1. Stay safe

- **Call 911, 1st in an emergency.**
- Assess the scene.
- Proceed with care only if it’s safe to do so.
- Wear PPE if suspect or know gas or chemicals have been released.

2. Know the signs of poisoning

- Burns or redness around the mouth and lips.

- Breath that smells like chemicals, such as gasoline or paint thinner.
- Difficulty breathing.
- Confusion or other altered mental status.
    - Poisoning symptoms are often like other emergency events.
    - Check for:
        - empty pill bottles or packages;
        - scattered pills;
        - burns, stains and odors on the person or nearby objects.
            - With a child, consider the possibility that he or she may have applied medicated patches or swallowed a button battery.

3. Call 911 or your local emergency number immediately if the person is:

    - Drowsy or unconscious.
    - Having difficulty breathing or has stopped breathing.
    - Uncontrollably restless or agitated.
    - Having seizures.
    - Known to have taken medications, or any other substance, intentionally or accidentally overdosed (in these situations the poisoning typically involves larger amounts, often along with alcohol).

4. You absolutely must also:

    - Call Poison Control at 800-222-1222 in the United States or Ontario Poison Centre at 1-800-268-9017 in Canada, or your local Poison Centre, even if:
        - The person is stable and has no symptoms.
        - You have called 911 – it will save the EMS team having to do it when they arrive.

5. Don’t make it worse

    - DO NOT give the person anything to eat unless directed to do so by Poison Control or Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel.
    - DO NOT try and make the person vomit.

6. Swallowed poison?

    - If the person is:
        - conscious
        - not having convulsions
        - able to swallow
    - AND the product swallowed is:
        - burning
        - irritating
        - or caustic
    - THEN give a small amount of water or milk to drink immediately.
    - Call the poison center for your country.

7. In the eye?

    - Rinse the eye immediately.
        - Every second matters.
        - A delay could result in loss of sight.
    - Remove contact lenses.
    - Use lots of room temperature water and irrigate for at least 15 to 20

minutes.
    - Adults and older children may find it easiest to hop in the shower.
- Wrap young children in a towel and let water from the faucet in the kitchen sink run over the eye – or slowly pour water from a pitcher.
    - Let the water hit the bridge of the nose and gently run into the eyes rather than pouring the water directly into the eye.
    - Important: Irrigate for at least 15 to 20 minutes.
- Encourage blinking.
- If someone else is available get them to call 911 while you start irrigating the eye.
    - If no one else is nearby, focus on irrigation for 15 minutes, then call 911 and Poison Control.

8. On the skin?

- Protect yourself – do not touch the contaminated area without gloves.
- If you do touch the chemical, rinse immediately.
- Remove contaminated clothing first. Help the victim if necessary.
- Rinse their skin immediately using lots of room temperature running water.
- For large spills, adults and older children may find it easiest to hop in the shower.
- Use mild soap to remove material that sticks to the skin.
- Important: Rinse for at least 15 minutes.
    - Call 911 as soon as possible-but focus on rinsing the skin.
    - Call Poison Control ASAP.

9. In the air?

- Take care not to inhale the gas yourself.
- Move the person to an area where they can get lots of fresh air.
- Call 911 and Poison Control.

10. Reduce the risk

- Keep chemicals and medicines locked up and out of sight.
- Be careful when handling substances, chemicals and cleaners that could be harmful. Only use them in well-ventilated areas and wear protective clothing, such as gloves and a face mask.
- Use common sense with medications.
    - Keep medications in the containers they came in.
    - Make sure they are kept out of children’s reach.
    - Read the product information carefully. Use only as directed.
    - Be aware of the possible side effects and any possible interactions with other medications you are taking.
    - Never use another person’s prescribed medications or medications that have expired.

Final Word

Poisoning takes many forms, so there are a wide range of symptoms and ways to treat. If you are not sure what has happened or what to do, the first thing to do is call 911. You can then contact poison control.