

fact sheet

Poisoning

Poisoning: The Statistics

Children younger than five years old account for most unintentional childhood poisonings in South Australia.

During 2002 in South Australia:

- o 14,000 calls were made to the Poisons Information Centre by concerned parents or carers' of young children.
- o 262 children under five were admitted to hospitals because of accidental poisonings.

While most poisoning incidents do not result in long-term harm, some are life threatening or can result in severe injury.

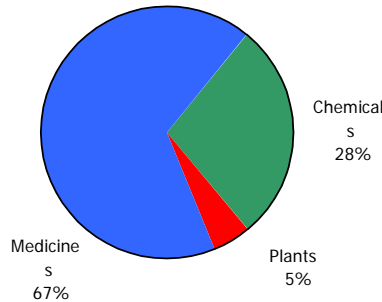
Toddlers most at risk

Toddlers aged one to two years are most at risk, as they begin to move about, often exploring their world with their mouths.



Medicines & household products commonly involved

In Australia most child poisonings involve medicines and common home chemicals.



Medicines are associated with the majority of child poisonings. Many result in hospital admissions.

Examples: cough and cold medicines, paracetamol, antihistamines, heart and blood pressure medication, anticonvulsants.

Household products are the other main cause of child poisoning.

Examples: weed killers, insecticides, solvents, rodenticides, cleaners, automatic dishwasher detergent, perfume and aftershaves.

Some garden plants are dangerous if eaten.

Examples: Oleander, Deadly Nightshade, Foxglove, and Daphne.

Unsafe storage a key issue

Commonly, poisonings occur when a child swallows, inhales or gets in eye or skin contact with a poisonous substance that is:

- not stored in a cupboard or enclosed space (51% of cases)
- not in a child resistant container (29.6% of cases)
- in a container that is not properly closed (9.7% of cases)
- as a result of adult error (9.7% of cases).

Some serious incidents occur when dangerous products are put into other containers (e.g. drink bottles).

Poisonings regularly occur when medicines and household products are left out, or are in use.

Amelia's story

Mum had just gone outside to hang out washing when two and a half-year-old Amelia woke unexpectedly from her nap.

Amelia was hungry. She wandered into the kitchen and managed to pull a stool over to the kitchen bench.

On the bench, Amelia saw a brightly coloured packet of what she thought might contain lollies. She opened the packet, which actually contained her father's hayfever anti-histamine tablets. He had left them out on the bench to remind himself to take them.

After a bit of work, Amelia got one of the tablets out, then another. She ate both before losing interest and turning her attention to the fruit bowl.

By the time her mum found Amelia and saw the packet on the floor, Amelia was drowsy and unsteady on her feet. Then her eyes began rolling backwards and her muscles went into spasms.

Her mum rushed her to the children's hospital where she was treated with drugs to stabilise her. She spent the night in hospital before being allowed to go home.

The experience was a traumatic one, both for Amelia and her parents, who thought they were going to lose their little girl. If dad's antihistamines had been locked away, or at least stored up high and out of sight of Amelia, this incident could likely have been avoided.

fact sheet

Poisoning

How Poisoning occurs

Most child poisonings occur at home. Usually, common medicines and household products are involved, often when these have been stored unsafely, or are 'in use'.

Poisonings often happen quickly, when parents are distracted, or adults are not in the room. The chance of poisoning increases when household routines are disrupted (moving house, being on holiday or having visitors).

Poisonings often coincide with unexpected changes in a child's development. At the hospital, parents often say, "I didn't know my child could climb so high" or 'they've never shown any interest in it before'.

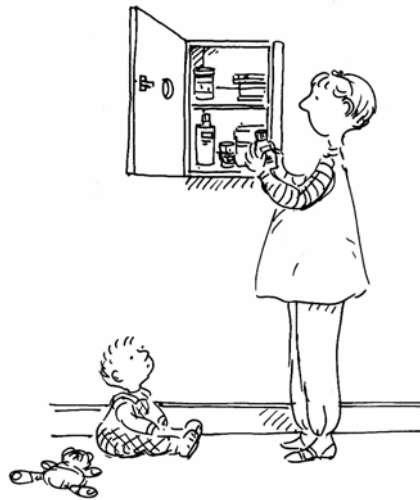


Real life poisonings

- Drank insecticide stored in soft drink bottle.
- Crawled into bathroom and opened a cupboard, found eating Napisan.
- At home in kitchen, swallowed dishwasher detergent while the parent was packing dishwasher.
- At Grandma's, a child was found playing with empty container of sleeping tablets.
- A child was found playing with mum's bag, having swallowed her heart tablets.
- Playing in friend's kitchen a child ate rat poison.

Priorities for prevention

- Check that all potential poisons are stored **out of sight** and **out of reach** at adult height or above. Preferably, store them in a **child resistant** cabinet.



- Have safe storage places wherever you keep potential poisons - for example in the kitchen, the bathroom, the laundry, and in garden sheds/garages.
- Know what poisons you have - check containers and read labels on all medicines and household products. Some common items that you may not expect (e.g. eucalyptus oil, iron tablets, some 'green' products) can be dangerous to children.

Other important things to do

- Children often find medicines and household chemicals when they are out for use. Whilst in use, never leave these in reach or unattended, and always replace caps. Put medicines away between uses.
- Store poisons and household products in original containers. Avoid bringing industrial strength cleaners into the home.

- Ask for and use household products and medicines that are in child resistant packaging.
- But remember, 'child resistant' does not mean 'child proof'. Store them safely.
- Check that child resistant caps are working (e.g. caps on some liquid medications 'gum up' and need to be cleaned). Also check that caps are on properly.
- Children tend to imitate adults - avoid taking medicines in front of them. Refer to medicines properly, not as 'lollies'.
- Return old or unused medicines to your chemist, and get rid of other unnecessary poisons (ask your local council for advice).
- Keep the dishwasher door locked. Fill the soap container only when ready to turn the appliance on, preferably when children are sleeping.
- Visitors' purses may contain medicines. Have a safe spot up high where these can be kept.
- Remove poisonous plants from your garden.

In an emergency

If your child swallows a poison do not try to make them vomit. Pick up the poison container and the child and take them with you to the phone. Ring the **Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26** (Australia-wide, 24 hours a day). Keep this number by your phone.

Kidsafe SA © 2004

Excerpts may be copied for educational purposes. Written permission is required to copy this fact sheet in its entirety.

For more information:

☎ (08) 8161 6318

Poisons Information Centre

☎ 13 11 26

www.kidsafe.com.au

This project is proudly sponsored by 'Hotel Care Community Projects', a program funded by South Australian hotels with gaming machines.