

# Poisoning prevention

The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Melbourne 2008



Young children have been known to eat and swallow foul-tasting and also dangerous substances. Although many poisonings occur in children, death is rare. Emergency treatment and admission to hospital of children due to swallowing or inhaling a poison unfortunately occurs all too often.

Most young children who are accidentally poisoned at home come from loving families with attentive, caring parents or guardians. However, it's simply not possible to watch your children every minute of the day.

Parents are often surprised to learn that they have so many poisonous substances at home and also the speed at which their child can get hold of them.

## Rates of poisoning

In Victoria, at least eight children a day receive medical attention after swallowing poison.

Poisoning occurs predominantly in children under five years of age and is most common in those between one and three years of age.

Poisoning is the second leading cause of injury hospitalisation, after accidental falls, in children 0–4 years of age in Victoria. Still most parents don't believe it will happen to their children or in their home.

The most serious poisoning usually involves medicines. Medications are responsible for more than 70% of childhood poisonings.

Eighty four percent of unintentional poisonings occur in the home because of improper storage.

*Statistics are based on those provided by the Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit (VISU) 2005.*

## Most common causes of poisoning in children under 5 years of age (calls to VPIC 2005)

### Drugs and medications

- Paracetamol
- Antibiotics
- Cough and cold medicines e.g. Demazin, Dimetapp

### Household chemicals

- Pesticides, rat or mice baits
- Cleaning agents – general purpose or hard surface cleaners
- Soaps, sink detergents
- Dishwasher powders or tablets
- Bleaches

There are many more poisons you need to be aware of, including vaporiser solutions, asthma medication, benzodiazepines (drugs prescribed as muscle relaxants or anticonvulsants), antihistamines, cosmetics, essential oils, contraceptives, tobacco, alcohol, iron tablets, migraine tablets, mothballs, petrol, oven cleaners and drain cleaners.

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## Suggested ways to reduce the risk of poisoning

You can reduce the risk of poisoning by the safe storage and safe use of medications and poisonous substances.

### Medications

Store medicines immediately after they have been bought. Keep them **out of reach and out of sight** of your child, in a cabinet or cupboard with a child-resistant lock, at least 1.5 metres above the ground.

While medicines and other products are in use never leave them in reach of a child, not even for a minute or two.

Do not confuse your child by referring to medicines as 'lollies'; they may sometimes look the same in shape, size and colour. Resist the temptation to use medicine dispensers, such as measuring cups, as toys.

Check the correct medication and dosage with your doctor or pharmacist and carefully read the label. More than the recommended dose may be harmful.

Dispose of unwanted and out-of-date medicines and chemicals safely by returning them to the pharmacy.

Refrigerators are not a safe storage location. When it is necessary to store medicines in the fridge, store in a small locked medicine box.

Children tend to imitate adults, so avoid taking medicines in their presence.

Avoid giving non-prescription medications routinely without consulting a doctor or pharmacist.

Handbags are not a safe storage location. Visitor's bags may contain medicines. Always keep them out of reach.

### Household products

Consider alternative cleaning products, for example a mixture of vinegar and bicarbonate of soda will effectively clean most surfaces.

Store dangerous products in a high cupboard with a child resistant lock.

Leave chemicals in their original containers, do not use drink bottles.

Store food separately from cleaning products and chemicals.

Choose containers with child resistant closures.

Lock garden sheds and garages.

### Dishwashing machines

Buy dishwashing powder or liquid in child resistant containers. They are corrosive and can severely burn if swallowed.

Put detergent in the machine last and close the door immediately. Keep children away while adding detergent to the machine.

When emptying the machine, check for leftover powder or liquid.

Choose a dishwasher with a child resistant lock or purchase an adhesive lock to prevent access by toddlers.

### Plants

Remove all poisonous plants from your garden.

If you are unsure of the correct names of the plants you have in your garden, take a small piece to your local nursery for identification.

For a list of poisonous plants visit the VPIC website at [www.rch.org.au/poisons/](http://www.rch.org.au/poisons/)

### Poisons information

For immediate and correct first aid advice, call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 (24 hours, Australia wide).

The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Flemington Road, Parkville Vic 3052  
Telephone 9345 5085

Website: [www.rch.org.au/safetycentre](http://www.rch.org.au/safetycentre)

For further information  
about the Safety Centre  
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[www.rch.org.au/safetycentre](http://www.rch.org.au/safetycentre)

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