Overdose, Accidental

A drug overdose occurs when a *chemical substance* (drug or medication) is used in amounts large enough to overcome a person. This may result in severe illness or death. This is a type of poisoning. Accidental overdoses of medications or other substances come from a variety of reasons. When this happens accidentally, it is often because the person taking the substance does not know enough about what they have taken. Drugs which commonly cause overdose deaths are alcohol, *psychotropic medications* (medications which affect the mind), pain medications, illegal drugs (street drugs) such as cocaine and heroin, and multiple drugs taken at the same time. It may result from careless behavior (such as over-indulging at a party). Other causes of overdose may include multiple drug use, a lapse in memory, or drug use after a period of no drug use.

Sometimes overdosing occurs because a person cannot remember if they have taken their medication.

A common unintentional overdose in young children involves multi-vitamins containing iron. Iron is a part of the hemoglobin molecule in blood. It is used to transport oxygen to living cells. When taken in small amounts, iron allows the body to restock hemoglobin. In large amounts, it causes problems in the body. If this overdose is not treated, it can lead to death.

Never take medicines that show signs of tampering or do not seem quite right. **Never** take medicines in the dark or in poor lighting. Read the label and check each dose of medicine before you take it. When adults are poisoned, it happens most often through carelessness or lack of information. Taking medicines in the dark or taking medicine prescribed for someone else to treat the same type of problem is a dangerous practice.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of overdose depend on the medication and amount taken. They can vary from over-activity with stimulant over-dosage, to sleepiness from depressants such as alcohol, narcotics and tranquilizers. Confusion, dizziness, nausea and vomiting may be present. If problems are severe enough coma and death may result.

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis and management are generally straightforward if the drug is known. Otherwise it is more difficult. At times, certain symptoms and signs exhibited by the patient, or blood tests, can reveal the drug in question.

TREATMENT

In an emergency department, most patients can be treated with supportive measures. Antidotes may be available if there has been an overdose of opioids or benzodiazepines. A rapid improvement will often occur if this is the cause of overdose.

At home or away from medical care:

- There may be no immediate problems or warning signs in children.
- Not everything works well in all cases of poisoning.
- Take immediate action. Poisons may act quickly.
- If you think someone has swallowed medicine or a household product, and the person is unconscious, having *seizures* (convulsions), or is not breathing, immediately call for an ambulance.

IF a person is conscious and appears to be doing OK but has swallowed a poison:

- Do not wait to see what effect the poison will have. Immediately call a poison control center (listed in the white pages of your telephone book under "Poison Control" or inside the front cover with other emergency numbers). Some poison control centers have TTY capability for the deaf. Check with your local center if you or someone in your family requires this service.
- Keep the container so you can read the label on the product for ingredients.
- Describe what, when, and how much was taken and the age and condition of the person poisoned. Inform them if the person is vomiting, choking, drowsy, shows a change in color or temperature of skin, is conscious or unconscious, or is convulsing.

- Do not cause vomiting unless instructed by medical personnel. Do not induce vomiting or force liquids into a person who is convulsing, unconscious, or very drowsy.

Stay calm and in control.

- Activated charcoal also is sometimes used in certain types of poisoning and you may wish to add a supply to your emergency medicines. It is available without a prescription. Call a poison control center before using this medication.

PREVENTION

Thousands of children die every year from unintentional poisoning. This may be from household chemicals, poisoning from carbon monoxide in a car, taking their parent's medications, or simply taking a few iron pills or vitamins with iron. Poisoning comes from unexpected sources.

- Store medicines out of the sight and reach of children, preferably in a locked cabinet. **Do not keep medications in a food cabinet.** Always store your medicines in a secure place. Get rid of expired medications.
- If you have children living with you or have them as occasional guests, you should have child-resistant caps on your medicine containers. Keep everything out of reach. Child proof your home.
- If you are called to the telephone or to answer the door while you are taking a medicine, take the container with you or put the medicine out of the reach of small children.
- Do not take your medication in front of children. Do not tell your child how good a medication is and how good it is for them. They may get the idea it is more of a treat.
- If you are an adult and have accidentally taken an overdose, you need to consider how this happened and what can be done to prevent it from happening again. If this was from a street drug or alcohol, determine if there is a problem that needs addressing. If you are not sure a problems exists, it is easy to talk to a professional and ask them if they think you have a problem. It is better to handle this problem in this way before it happens again and has a much worse consequence.

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