

Accidental Poisoning in Children

Approximately 200 children under 5 years of age attend Suffolk hospitals' emergency department per year with a concern that a poisonous substance has been ingested or adversely affected the child's health (e.g. inhalation of carbon monoxide gas).

The Child Accident Prevention Trust (CAPT) reports that a staggering 25,000 under-5's are rushed to A&E each year in the UK with suspected accidental poisoning. One in five of these cases (that's around 15 every day) will be serious enough for the child to be admitted to hospital for further observation and/or treatment.

What do children take?

The most common medications or substances children take are:

- Calpol or Nurofen - Don't be fooled by the 'child-resistant tops,' some 3 and 4-year-olds are quite capable of opening them!
- Parent/grandparent painkillers, blood pressure tablets or prescription drugs.
- Karvol or other decongestant.
- Household cleaning agents - bleach, toilet blocks, but the favourite is the brightly-coloured liquitabs for washing machines or dishwashers.
- Weedkillers and turps.
- Alcohol, cigarettes, perfumes and room fragrances can all be harmful too.

Developmental Risks

At six months, a child will explore his/her surroundings with their hands and mouth. As they start to crawl more harmful substances will come into their reach; toilet cleaners, cleaning agents under the cupboard, tablets left in a handbag.

Toddlers are often more at risk than any other age group, they love to explore and will mimic another person or child. They can move simple objects in order to reach or climb to areas previously considered inaccessible.

Children aged between 3-5 years are more able to remove the child-resistant tops. They may understand some of the foods that are safe to eat but could confuse tablets with colourful sweets so keep them locked safely away and in the original bottles. Teach your child not to eat anything they pick outside as poisonous berries could be confused with the fruit they normally eat.

Safety Checks

- Walk through the house and try and picture it from a child's perspective.
- Do not leave your handbag open on the floor.
- Lock all medicines and cleaning products away and avoid leaving tablets in handbags in accessible places. Some products may contain a bittering agent to make the child spit it out as it tastes revolting.
- Don't forget the garage or garden shed.
- Consider other home hazards when visiting family or friends.
- Regular boiler checks/carbon monoxide alarm.

Resources

- <https://www.capt.org.uk/poisoning-prevention>
- <https://www.rosipa.com/home-safety/advice/child-safety/accidents-to-children/#poisoning>

Further information about all Suffolk Safeguarding Children Board publications can be found on our website. www.suffolkscb.org.uk