

Labels and locks: Two keys to prevent poisonings

By Kim Krisberg

Our homes are filled with products that make our lives easier and better, from miracle cleaners to lifesaving medications. With so many conveniences, it's easy to forget that even seemingly harmless items can be poisonous if used the wrong way.

"The reality is that anything can be a poison — even things that are good for us can be a poison if we take too much," says Barbara Crouch, director of the Utah Poison Control Center.

Every day in the United States, more than 2,000 people visit emergency rooms because of unintentional poisonings, and more than 10,000 calls are made to poison control centers. Children ages 5 and younger experience more than half of poison exposures. But adults account for 90 percent of poisoning deaths. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that as of 2009, unintentional poisoning, which includes drug overdoses, caused more deaths among people ages 25–64 than car crashes.

Accidental poisoning is a real risk and the majority of such poisonings happen at home. That means you can have a hand in stopping them from happening in the first place. As Crouch says: "Most household poisonings are preventable."

Labels, locks and little hands

First, what is a poison? CDC defines a poison as "any substance, including medications, that is harmful to your body if too much is eaten, inhaled, injected or absorbed through the skin."



And just about every room in our homes contains something that can poison us, from cleaning products under the kitchen sink to cosmetics in the bathroom cabinet to the chemicals we store in the garage. In fact, cosmetics, personal care products and household cleaning products are among the top items involved in poison exposures, according to the American Association of Poison Control Centers.

A good first step to preventing poisoning is to always read a product's label and how-to-use directions. Also, keep household chemicals in their original, labeled containers, never put such chemicals in food containers

and keep them stored separately from food, says Crouch. Be aware of how attractive a product may be for young kids. For example, says Crouch, cleaning products that come in spray bottles can look like a fun toy for children, so it's a good idea to keep them locked up or out of reach of little hands.

Crouch described very young children — those 1–2 years old — as "oral explorers." In



>> For more information about poison prevention, visit www.aapcc.org.

other words, they like to put things in their mouths. And many items we tend to leave out in the open, such as cosmetics or shampoo, don't have child-proof closures. Plus, some household items, such as laundry detergent packets, can look like pieces of candy. The best advice is to simply keep potentially hazardous items out of children's reach or in locked or child-proof cabinets.

"All it takes is a little distraction that diverts your attention and a child can grab that container," Crouch says. "So be cognizant of things that are left out."

Of course, children aren't the only ones at risk. Crouch notes that adults can mistakenly grab the wrong container as well, which is another good reason to never store cleaning and other chemical products near food. Also, she recommends turning on fans and opening windows when using household chemical products and never mixing such products together.

In case of emergency

Stop what you're doing and put this number on your fridge and in your cellphone: 1-800-222-1222. That's the national Poison Help Line, which will automatically redirect your call to your regional poison control center.

Poison control centers are available around the clock and staff can rapidly assess your situation to determine whether it can be managed via phone or if you should head to the emergency room. Never hesitate to call, Crouch says.

"Don't wait for symptoms to show up," she says. "The best time to call is right away." In



Preventing medication mishaps

According to CDC, drugs caused more than 90 percent of all unintentional poisoning deaths in 2009, and prescription painkillers were the top culprits.

Whether the drug is prescription or over-the-counter, it's important to read the label and follow the directions. Also, don't be shy about talking with a pharmacist if you're unsure or worried about how a new drug will interact with medications you're already taking, Crouch says.

For people with impaired vision, make sure you can properly read a medication's label or ask for larger print. Always take your medicine with the light on.

Never share your prescription medications and keep them locked up and out of children's reach. Crouch even recommends keeping a medication log so you'll know if someone in your household is taking your medications.

"People think that if it's a prescription and legal, then it's OK to share," she says. "But the reality is that they should never be shared."

