

# Poisons

You should suspect poisoning if a previously healthy person suddenly develops:

- Vomiting, purging, abdominal pains and cramps. These are typical of “irritant” poisons, or
- Delirium, going on to unconsciousness. These occur in “nerve” poisons.

It is even more suspicious if more than one person develops these symptoms.

Other signs of poisoning may be a suspicious smell on the breath or staining or burning around the lips. The symptoms of poisoning may not come on at once, and in fact are often delayed for some hours.

Many substances may cause poisoning:

- Poisons such as rat killers, snail bait, “dips” and so on.
- Many crop and garden sprays and household substances like cleaners, fuel, peeling wall paint.
- Food poisoning from food which has gone bad (especially meats and seafood).
- Many garden and veld plants are poisonous – the berries of lilac, syringa, stinkblaar, castor oil tree and some types of mushrooms cause the symptoms of irritant poisons but may also later cause “nerve” symptoms.
- Nearly all medicines are poisonous if taken in wrong doses.

## **WHAT TO DO**

- Quickly call a poison control centre or emergency number and follow their instructions. Take the poison container to the phone with you.
- Treat the victim for shock and check breathing frequently.
- DO NOT give anything by mouth or encourage vomiting unless you have been advised to do so by medical professionals.
- Keep any tablets, medicine, foods, which you think the patient may have eaten, and anything a doctor could use to identify the type of poison, e.g. vomit.

## **PREVENT POISONING**

- Keep medicines and hazardous substances locked up out of reach of children. Remember, children will put almost anything in their mouths!
- Keep poisons and food separate. Never use food containers to store poisonous substances.
- Never eat fruits, berries, mushrooms etc in the wild unless you are *sure* what they are.

## **TYPES OF POISONING**

A poison is a substance that causes injury or illness when it gets into a person's body. The four ways a person can be poisoned are:

- *ingestion* (swallowing it)
- *inhalation* (breathing it)
- *absorption* (absorbing it through the skin)
- *injection* (by having it injected into the body).

Ingested poisons include foods, alcohol, medication, household and garden items, and certain plants. Inhaled poisons may be gases, like carbon monoxide from car exhaust, carbon dioxide from

sewers, and chlorine from a pool, or fumes from household products like glue, paint, cleaners, or drugs. Absorbed poisons enter the body through the skin; they may come from plants, fertilizers or pesticides. Injected poisons enter the body through bites or stings of insects, spiders, ticks, marine life, snakes, and other animals, or medications injected with a hypodermic needle.

### ***Ingestion***

If you suspect that someone has been poisoned, call your Poison Control Centre or emergency medical help immediately. Signs of poisoning are nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, chest or abdominal pain, difficulty breathing, changes in consciousness, seizures, or burns around the lips or tongue or on the skin. If you believe someone may have swallowed a poison, try to determine what type of poison was ingested, how much was taken, and when it was taken. If you find a container, bring it to the telephone with you when you make your emergency call. Do not give the victim anything to eat or drink unless medical professionals tell you to. If you are unsure of what the poison was and the victim vomits, save some of it so the hospital can analyse it and determine what the poison was.

### ***Inhalation***

If you suspect that someone has been poisoned, call your Poison Control Centre or emergency medical help immediately. Signs of poisoning by inhalation may include pale or bluish skin. Remove the victim from the source of the toxic fumes to get some fresh air as soon as possible.

### ***Absorption***

If you suspect that someone has been poisoned, call your Poison Control Centre or emergency medical help immediately. If poison such as dry or wet chemicals gets on the skin, flush the area with large amounts of water, and continue flushing the area with water until help arrives.

### ***Injection – Stings and Bites***

If someone is stung by an insect such as a bee, remove the stinger by scraping it away from the skin with your fingernail or a plastic card, or use tweezers. Wash the area with soap and water, cover it to keep it clean, and apply ice to reduce pain and swelling. If the victim begins to have trouble breathing, he or she may be experiencing an allergic reaction and his or her body is going into anaphylactic shock. You must call for emergency help immediately or the victim's airway may constrict, preventing breathing and killing the victim.

### ***Scorpions and Spiders***

Only a few species of scorpions are known to cause death. Scorpions live in dry, under rocks, logs and the bark of certain trees. They are most active at night. If you are stung by a scorpion, you would be wise to call a doctor unless you are positive that the one that bit you is not poisonous. Symptoms of spider bites and scorpion stings are: nausea, vomiting, difficulty breathing or swallowing, sweating and salivating profusely, severe pain in the bite/sting area, a mark indicating a bite/sting, and swelling of the area. If you suspect you have been bitten by poisonous spider or stung by a scorpion, wash the wound, apply ice to the area, and call emergency help immediately.

### ***Marine Life***

The stings of some different types of marine life, such as sting rays, sea anemones and jellyfish may make you sick. If you are stung, soak the affected area in salt water and apply a paste of baking soda or meat tenderiser, or even ice, as soon as possible to reduce swelling. If you are unsure what stung you, have a history of allergic reactions to marine life stings, are stung on the face or neck, or are having difficulty breathing, call for emergency help immediately.

### ***Snakes***

If you are bitten by a snake, call for help immediately. Wash the wound and immobilise the area, keeping it lower than the heart if possible. DO NOT apply ice, DO NOT cut the wound, and DO NOT apply a tourniquet. Get yourself medical attention quickly.

## ***Rabies***

If you are bitten by a wild or domestic animal, you may get an infection and you will have injury to the soft tissue. The most serious possible consequence is rabies, which is transmitted through the saliva of diseased animals, including dogs, cats, mongooses, cattle, and bats. Infected animals may behave strangely; for example, a nocturnal animal may be active during the day, or the animal may drool, appear partially paralysed, or act irritable, mean, or quiet. Rabies is fatal if it is not treated promptly. If you suspect that you have been bitten by a rabid animal, call for emergency help immediately. Get away from the animal. **DO NOT** try to catch or hold it. Try to remember what the animal looked like, as well as where you last saw it. Wash the wound with soap and water if it is minor, control bleeding and apply an antibiotic ointment and a dressing. If the wound is bleeding heavily, do not try to wash it; just try to control the bleeding, and call for help.