

# HOLIDAY POISONING HAZARDS

The winter holiday season brings lots of festive activity to our homes - and can bring accidental poisoning to our families. Unusual plants and decorations are found indoors, visitors bring their medications in suitcases and purses, alcoholic beverages are served at holiday parties and brightly packaged products are underneath the tree. These changes in the home environment may set the stage for problems. Excited, curious youngsters may suddenly have access to things not usually found in the "child-proofed" home. Supervision of children may decrease somewhat as adult attention is distracted by holiday preparations.

What can you do to prevent an accidental poisoning from interrupting the holiday season? First, learn to identify those holiday items which may be poisonous to children - and also those which hold little danger. Some things feared by many people as highly poisonous which DO NOT deserve that reputation include:



Poinsettia - accidental ingestion of this plant has not caused ANY cases of serious poisoning in children despite thousands of exposures each Christmas.



Shellacked or Varnished Ornaments- the shellac or varnish, once dried, is very poorly digested and therefore not poisonous . Dough ornaments may contain lots of table salt which can cause poisoning in children who eat more than a small amount.



Tinsel and Icicles - often made of plastic or aluminum, they are not usually poison but can cause choking.

Tree Ornaments - most modern ornaments are plastic, glass, or styrofoam and are NOT poisonous. Many ornaments can cause choking if swallowed. Very old ornaments could be covered with lead-containing paints so should not be used in homes with small children.

Of course, there are products in the home during the holiday season which can cause acute poisoning if ingested by children. Some of the more common ones include:

## Alcohols



children are especially at risk for poisoning from even small amounts of ethanol alcohol because their blood sugar may drop to low levels. Colognes and after shaves have high alcohol content and are dangerous to keep under the Christmas tree, within easy reach . Beverage alcohols - beer, wine, liquor - should be stored out of reach as well. After the holiday party, empty all beverage glasses before curious children can sample left-overs.





**Mistletoe** although American mistletoe is not as deadly as the European type, ingestion of more than two or three of the berries can cause poisoning in small children.



**Holly** the bright red berries are very attractive to a small child and can cause severe vomiting and diarrhea if more than a few are ingested.



**Batteries** yes, those battery-operated toys are a potential source of poisoning! Swallowed batteries can cause choking, intestinal blockages or injury, and poisoning from leaking contents.



**Medications** these are a problem all year, of course. Family and friends can bring unexpected danger with them when they visit during the holidays. Luggage and purses left unattended are attractive to the curious child, who may be poisoned by the medications carried inside. Lock them up, out of reach.

Prevention of accidental poisoning during the holiday season begins with awareness of the danger. Use common sense in choosing decorations and plants. Be sure to store alcohol-based products, and all medications, in a secure, LOCKED cabinet. Supervise small children playing with battery-operated toys. And if an exposure to a potential poison does occur, stay calm and immediately call the Virginia Poison Center. The nurse specialist there will be able to quickly assess the situation and tell you the correct first aid. Poison control centers are available twenty-four hours daily to provide fast access to information that may prevent an accidental poisoning from becoming a serious illness. Expert help from the Virginia Poison Center is always FREE and confidential.

Don't let the holidays be a time of sadness because of poisoning---exercise caution, keep the poison center number posted and enjoy a happy and safe holiday season.

**The Virginia Poison Center's emergency telephone number is  
1-800-222-1222  
or 804-828-9123 (Richmond Area)**

