

Absinthe

A 19 year old college student is brought to a Maryland emergency department by ambulance with vomiting and hallucinations. She admits that she "drank too much absinthe". Upon further questioning, she states that it is common for college students on her campus to buy absinthe over the internet and drink it at parties. She was given antiemetics and discharged following a few hours of observation.

Absinthe is a green, bitter, and highly toxic liquor that is distilled from wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*) and a variety of other herbs. Absinthe, also known as "the green fairy", has been used for centuries and was popular in the United States and Europe in the 19th century. Many artists, writers and actors have been known to consume absinthe for its psychoactive effects. Vincent Van Gogh, Edgar Allen Poe and Ernest Hemingway are among those who drank absinthe. More recently, Marilyn Manson, Eminem and Johnny Depp have used absinthe. Because of its bitterness, it is traditionally prepared by drizzling ice water over a sugar cube resting on a slotted spoon and into the absinthe. The mixture becomes milky white with a greenish tint. It has been banned in the United States since the early 1900's because of its toxic effects; however, it is available in some countries, illegally imported, and can be purchased over the internet.

Ingestion of absinthe can result in acute and chronic toxicity. Wormwood contains thujone, a toxic terpene. Thujone is structurally similar to tetrahydrocannabinol, the active principal in marijuana, and acts at the same central nervous system receptor site. Like the terpene camphor, thujone directly affects neurons, causing seizure activity. Acute toxicity is characterized by restlessness, vomiting, dizziness, muscular disorders, hallucinations, seizures, coma, respiratory arrest and death. Chronic toxicity, or "absinthism", is a syndrome consisting of gastritis, thirst, slowed mentation, personality changes, forgetfulness, psychosis, pica behavior, visual color changes, tremors, and seizures. Treatment of absinthe intoxication and overdose is symptomatic and supportive.

The Maryland Poison Center encourages all health care providers to report all suspected cases of absinthe ingestion to the poison center at 1-800-222-1222.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...Absinthe typically contains 70-80% alcohol?

Even when diluted, there is a high concentration of ethanol present, resulting in acute and chronic ethanol intoxication. Additive effects such as nausea, vomiting and some central nervous system changes can occur because of the ethanol content. Users describe the psychoactive effects of wormwood as being quite different from the ethanol inebriation that results from drinking absinthe.



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