

Poison Prevention Press

May/June 2019

Volume 12, Issue 3

Preventing Medicine Misadventures

Follow these safety tips:

- Keep an up-to-date list of medicines, including prescription, OTC, herbal, and vitamins
- Review medicine list with doctors and pharmacists
- Ask pharmacists for help when choosing OTC medicines to avoid drug interactions
- Read the label every time the medicine is taken
- Follow directions exactly and never stop taking a medicine without talking to your doctor first
- Never take someone else's medicine
- Safely discard unused and expired medicine

Did you know that...

- Nationwide, older adults only account for 7%-8% of cases at poison centers, but they account for 25%-26% of deaths?
- There are more than 600 prescription and OTC medicines that contain acetaminophen?

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Top 3 Poisons of 2018: Adults and Older Adults

In 2018, we handled about 39,000 cases. Roughly 31,000 cases were about exposures in people; the rest were about animals or general calls for information. We are going to look at the most common substances mentioned in the calls we receive, broken down by age group. The children's edition was done last month.

Adults (20-59 years old) accounted for 33.7% of cases in 2018. The top three poisons reported were:

#3: Stimulants and Street Drugs— Stimulants include prescription medicines for ADHD and caffeine. Commonly these cases are dosing errors or intentionally taking more than recommended for an energy boost. Street drugs such as heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and synthetic cannabinoids are included here as well. Adults are commonly exposed to these substances as a result of substance use disorders.

#2: Sedatives, Hypnotics, and Antipsychotics- These medicines are often prescribed, but are commonly misused or abused. Benzodiazepines, such as Valium® or Xanax®, lead this category. These medicines are commonly used to treat anxiety or to aid with sleep. Unfortunately, these medicines are used in suicide attempts.

#1: Analgesics (Pain Relievers)- Dosing errors are common with pain relievers. The calls that we receive are often about the misuse and abuse of prescription pain relievers. Suicide attempts can also involve a pain reliever. Over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers like acetaminophen and ibuprofen lead this category, followed by opioid pain relievers. Reading the label is important.

Older Adults (59+ years old) accounted for 9.8% of exposures in 2018. The top three poisons reported were:

#3: Sedatives, Hypnotics, and Antipsychotics- As with adults, benzodiazepines lead this category. Dosing errors can increase the likelihood of experiencing adverse effects, like drowsiness and being unsteady on your feet, which can lead to falls.

#2: Analgesics (Pain Relievers)- OTC pain relievers like acetaminophen and ibuprofen lead this category. If taking prescription medicines, check with the poison center, your pharmacist, or your doctor to see if they will interact with an OTC medicine. Some prescription pain relievers contain acetaminophen, so taking an OTC pain reliever or cough medicine with acetaminophen could result in an acetaminophen overdose.

#1: Cardiovascular Medicines- Heart medicines are commonly prescribed in this age group. Some medicines pose more of a risk than others. That's why calling the experts is recommended when there is a mistake with heart medicines. If you can't remember if you took your medicine, don't guess. Call us to see whether you should take a potential second dose or skip the dose.

While all of the top three substances reported last year were medicines, we are also here to help if someone has been exposed to other products such as cleaners, personal care products, or pesticides. We can also give expert advice on bites and stings, and general poison information.