

Keeping Babies and Preschoolers Safe from Addictive, Toxic Substances

America is in the midst of an addiction epidemic, and dangerous drugs, including opioids, are more prevalent than ever before. This crisis has contributed to a rise in the number of children who have experienced serious consequences from coming in contact with toxic, addictive substances, ranging from dangerous, illicit drugs to food and drink items that may be relatively harmless to adults. Regardless of the risk these products pose to grown-ups, health care professionals should adopt strategies to safeguard young children.

Discuss addictive, toxic substances with your patients

Most homes contain at least some substances considered “addictive and toxic,” and parents may be unaware of how dangerous these products can be to children. At pediatric well or sick visits, ask your patients and their caregivers about the substances in their home. Counsel them on the health risk of a poisoning event and share advice on how they can store and dispose of these substances properly. Remind them that children, especially those under six, frequently put unattended items in their mouth and are likely to mirror their parents’ behaviors, including their use of nicotine, alcohol or prescription and illicit drugs. **It is never too early to talk to parents about protecting their children from the potentially life-threatening harms of addiction and addictive substances.**

Products to discuss with patients and caregivers include:

- **Nicotine** like e-liquids used with e-cigarettes; nicotine gum or patches
- **Alcoholic beverages** like sweetened mixed drinks, beers, wine coolers and hard liquor
- **Caffeine** like coffee, tea, soft drinks, energy drinks and some snack foods like potato chips, candy bars and specialty water
- **Prescription medicines** like painkillers, tranquilizers and sedatives
- **Marijuana** like edibles in the form of baked goods, candy and beverages
- **Illegal drugs** like cocaine, psychedelic mushrooms, methamphetamine and heroin

Supporting the Youngest Victims of the Addiction Epidemic

Children living in households affected by addiction are at an increased risk of accidentally coming in contact with a range of drugs as well as alcohol and nicotine products.

If you suspect a patient or the parent of a patient is struggling with substance use or addiction, provide brief interventions or referrals to treatment.

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Prepare for poisoning events

Quick action in the face of an exposure or poisoning event can save a life. Call the Poison Help Hotline immediately if you suspect a child has been exposed to a toxic, addictive substance, is acting strangely and/or is displaying any of the following symptoms:

- Lethargy
- Headache
- Slurred speech
- Drowsiness
- Abdominal pain
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Heart palpitations
- Difficulty breathing
- Elevated body temperature
- Hallucinations
- Convulsions/seizures
- Unresponsiveness
- Coma
- In extreme cases, death

Encourage parents to be prepared by saving the phone number for the national Poison Help Hotline in their phone: call 1-800-222-1222 or text POISON to 797979. The nation's poison control centers are available to help 24/7/365. All calls are answered by poison control specialists and are confidential.

If a child is unresponsive or having trouble breathing, call 911 immediately.

Consider all causes

It may be difficult to detect if a child in your care has been exposed to an addictive substance, as the symptoms frequently resemble those of other illnesses. Given the increased accessibility of addictive substances to young children, if you encounter a child displaying any of the symptoms listed above, exposure should be one of the **primary** issues you look for.

If possible, collect information from caregivers about their recreational and therapeutic drug use to rule out the possibility that the child's symptoms are a result of a drug exposure. And, consider conducting a routine, rapid urine test for substances such as cannabinoids, cocaine, opioids and other illicit drugs. **Making the right diagnosis quickly may help save a child's life.**

For additional research findings and further guidance on what health care professionals can do to protect children from the harms of substance use and addiction, visit www.centeronaddiction.org and www.aapcc.org.



The National Center on
Addiction and Substance Abuse



Tips for HCPs