

Holiday dangers: It's not the poinsettia you need to worry about



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When it comes to holiday safety people are often wary of the wrong things, many experts say.

For instance, ask anyone what they are particularly vigilant about during the Christmas season, when children are around. Chances are they'll tell you poisonous poinsettias.

And while a child who eats the plant's leaves may experience a sore stomach or perhaps even vomit, and the sap can cause some irritation if it comes in contact with skin, poinsettias are not toxic.

"We get an awful lot of calls about children who have ingested bits from the [poinsettia]leaf and it's believed to be extremely dangerous. In actual fact, it's really not," said Heather Hudson, advanced nursing practice educator at the Ontario Poison Centre. "It's just one of those urban myths that has perpetuated over the years." The bigger concern with poinsettias and other plants is the fact they can be a choking hazard, she said.

The most common holiday household dangers aren't even on most people's radar. One of the most common culprits? Alcohol.

Forgetting to empty glasses after a party or leaving bottles of liquor or wine out where little hands can grab them can lead to serious consequences, Ms. Hudson said, adding that the Ontario Poison Centre frequently receives calls relating to accidental alcohol consumption. Even a small amount of alcohol can cause major health problems in children.

"In young people, [alcohol] can be extremely dangerous," Ms. Hudson said. "Alcohol is one of those hidden hazards that people maybe just don't think of."

What else should you be wary of – or not worry about – during the festive season?

Holly: Many think holly can be quite dangerous, but eating a few berries will likely only cause an upset stomach. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia warns that eating more than three holly berries can cause prolonged nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and drowsiness. The edges of the plant can be very sharp and the plant can be a choking hazard.

Mistletoe: Experts say ingesting small amounts of mistletoe berries, leaves and stems is unlikely to cause an issue. But consuming large amounts may lead to more serious problems.

Eggnog: This holiday drink is traditionally made with raw eggs, which carries a risk of salmonella poisoning. Buying store-bought eggnog, which is pasteurized, is one way to avoid this. If making homemade eggnog, Health Canada advises heating eggs and milk to at least 71 C and then refrigerating the mixture in small amounts in shallow containers so it cools quickly.

Windshield washer fluid and antifreeze: The Ontario Poison Centre often receives calls after someone has accidentally consumed windshield washer fluid or antifreeze, which can be extremely dangerous and lead to blindness, seizures, heart-rhythm changes and even death. Ms. Hudson said some receive stocking-stuffer-sized containers of antifreeze and leave them under the tree. These items need to be kept out of the reach of children.

Disc batteries: Many toys and gadgets under Christmas trees across the country will contain flat, circular batteries that can be swallowed, cause choking and lead to serious problems. Experts advise keeping all items with disc batteries out of reach of children.

Christmas ornaments: Many children put holiday decorations and ornaments in their mouths, which could pose health risks, depending on the type of material used. Always supervise children when they are near the tree.

Carbon monoxide: A deadly threat that's not exclusive to the holiday season, carbon-monoxide poisonings often occur in winter when people are using furnaces, wood stoves and other appliances that can produce the toxic gas. Health Canada

advises Canadians to install a certified carbon-monoxide detector. The department also warns Canadians to take numerous other precautions. Have yearly inspections of vent pipes for fuel-burning heating equipment, as well as chimney flues. During and after snow storms, check exhaust vents for items such as dryers, furnaces and wood-burning or gas stoves.

When it comes to potential holiday hazards, experts advise that when in doubt, call a poison-control centre. Although not all provinces have their own poison-control centre, Canadians can also call the U.S. National Capital Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222.

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