



Overlooked Hazards Can Pose A Threat To Children

Don't feed young children nuts or shellfish. Discard old baby walkers. Lock up the drain cleaner and bleach. Parents and caregivers have heard those warnings so often they have them down cold. What parents don't realize is that the average household contains a bevy of items no one thought to warn them about.

"If you check throughout your home, you will be shocked," warned Debra Holtzman, an attorney in Hollywood, FL, and author of "The Panic-Proof Parent: Creating a Safe Lifestyle for Your Family."

One emerging problem is what Holtzman calls "dead ringers." These products "look strikingly similar to food or drink we commonly eat, but are very dangerous if a child were to ingest it," she said. For example, the taste and appearance of many medicines today can easily confuse even an older child into thinking the medicine is candy.

Here are a few more examples of potentially deadly household items:

Table salt – As little as half a teaspoon ingested by an infant or a tablespoon by a toddler can cause damage to his or her central nervous system, Holtzman said.

Mouthwash – Many brands of mouthwash contain alcohol. Although all alcohol is toxic to a child, Holtzman said mouthwash could contain "more alcohol than what is in your liquor cabinet." Unfortunately, people are unaware of this and often believe this product is safe, she warned.

Other products that contain alcohol include perfumes, colognes, and aftershave; vanilla, lemon, and almond extracts; cough and cold medicines; and rubbing alcohol.

Baby oil – Although parents still stock baby oil among their changing table supplies, drinking it is dangerous. When swallowed, baby oil – or any petroleum-based product for that matter – can easily "go down the wrong way and get into your lungs," Holtzman said. A small amount in the lungs can cause pneumonia within a few hours. The substance also can spread out over the inner surface of the lungs, preventing oxygen from entering the blood stream.

Sound-producing toys – Toys can produce sounds at levels that can injure a child's hearing, Holtzman cautioned. These include toy caps, noise-making guns or sirens. Parents should also test squeaky toys because infants may hold them close to their ears.

Antifreeze – Most major brands of antifreeze contain ethylene glycol, a very toxic substance with a sweet taste. The sweet taste attracts kids and can lead them to drink large amounts. Holtzman recommends using antifreeze that contains propylene glycol, a less toxic alternative that does not have the same sweet taste.

Garage doors – Watch out for automatic garage doors, Holtzman warned. "All you need is someone running under it, or a child sitting under it."

Don't rely on the door's auto-reverse feature to save your child. For the auto-reverse to work, the door has to hit an item before it goes back up. "Garage doors are among the heaviest items in the home, so you don't want it hitting your child," she said.



Plants – Plants are the one item Holtzman finds most problematic because it may not be readily apparent that a child has ingested a leaf or berry.

“With chemicals in the house, kids will knock it over or spill it. There is some sign that they have tampered with it. But with plants, you can’t see the spilled bottle or the tipped glass,” she said. “There may be no signs at all, especially if it happened outdoors.” Compounding the problem is the fact that children may not display symptoms immediately.

Two common houseplants frequently ingested by children are dieffenbachia and philodendron. Both contain microscopic crystals in their leaves that can cause extreme pain and inflammation. “In extreme cases, it can cause enough swelling to cut off the airways,” she said. “I caution parents to really know the plants in and around the home.”

Holtzman isn’t telling parents to throw out the table salt or stop using mouthwash. Instead, she urges parents to be proactive. “Always overestimate your child’s capability.” Holtzman said. “When you have really toxic things, it’s not enough to hide them or put them on a high shelf. You really have to lock them away. You need to use as many layers of protection as you possibly can. It’s not overkill. It’s being prudent and being safe.”

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