Holiday Plants with Poison

Deck the halls with boughs of holly—just don’t eat them!

Many of the plants associated with the holiday season have a reputation for being poisonous. But which ones are dangerous? How serious is the threat? Should you forgo the décor if you have young children? Experts from the Blue Ridge Poison Center help separate fact from fiction and offer some safety tips for your family.

MISTLETOE

American Mistletoe (Phoradendron loranthaceae) has smooth, green oval shaped leaves and clusters of waxy white berries. Mistletoe is a parasitic plant, growing as a clump clinging to the branches and trunks of deciduous trees throughout the U.S. The entire plant contains toxins that can cause gastrointestinal problems such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea if swallowed. Most cases reported to poison centers in the past 25 years have involved young children who ate only a few leaves or berries at most. In those cases, symptoms were either mild or did not develop at all. Severe reactions are less common and

MEDICINE MISTAKES: More Common Than You Think

The label caught Ron’s eye as he returned the bottle to the medicine cabinet. He had just taken his wife’s Tramadol, a prescription painkiller, instead of his Trazodone, a prescription sedative.

Ellen panicked after realizing she had mistakenly been giving her 12 year old son 6 teaspoons of cough medicine every 4 hours-- instead of 4 teaspoons every 6 hours --as the label indicated.

POISON TRIVIA

The phrase “slip a mickey” is slang for the criminal act of adding a poison to a person’s food or drink - without their knowledge -with the intent of causing a loss of consciousness. Where did that phrase come from?
Alma was preparing to take the dog for a walk when she noticed her heart felt like it was racing and her hands were jittery. Then it dawned on her: she had taken her prescription Wellbutrin twice that morning after being interrupted by a phone call.

Ron, Ellen, and Alma (not their real names) were all helped by the Blue Ridge Poison Center after their medicine mistake. And they weren’t alone. Last year more than 277,000 people in the U.S. reached out to a poison center because of a mistake with medicine. Over 84,000 of those calls were about unintentional double-dosing.

“The most common mistake people make is taking their medicine twice,” says Andre Berkin, BSN, CSPI, one of the nurse specialists who answers those calls at the BRPC. “Something distracts you or interrupts you during your normal routine and you forget that you already took your medicine. It can happen to anybody.” Other common mistakes include taking the wrong dose (40,824 calls), taking the wrong medicine (46,100 calls), or taking medicine the wrong way (12,346 calls). Berkin explains: “Spiriva is an asthma medication that you inhale into your lungs. The medicine comes in the form of a capsule that you load into an inhaling device, where it becomes aerosolized. Sometimes people get confused and swallow the capsule instead. It looks like a pill.”

Preventing medicine mistakes begins when you bring them home from the pharmacy.

- If possible, store medicines prescribed to individuals separately, such as on different shelves in a cabinet.
- In homes with more than one pill box user, write an individual’s name clearly on each box (even better: avoid having identical boxes).
- Before you take or give any medicine, pause long enough to look at the label to make certain you are taking the correct product. Read the dosing instructions carefully.
- If taking or giving liquid medicine, use the measuring device that comes with the product instead of a kitchen spoon.
- One last bit of advice: “Don’t take any medicine in the dark,” offers Berkin. “Always turn on the light and put on your glasses if you need them to see clearly.”

Prevention does work. But if a mistake happens, specialists like Berkin are only a quick, free phone call away. “We want you to call us if, even if the person who made the mistake is not experiencing any symptoms at the moment.” Berkin adds that callers who may be embarrassed by their mistake need not worry. “Poison center specialists are human, too. We all make mistakes. When mistakes happen, we are here to help. Also, your call is confidential.” Call 1-800-222-1222 any time—day or night—to get advice from the Blue Ridge Poison Center. You can also visit www.PoisonHelp.org and answer a few questions online to find out if your mistake is serious enough to warrant a phone call to the hotline.

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associated with eating larger amounts of the plant, especially the leaves. If young children are going to be present in your home this holiday season, keep mistletoe up high, out of their reach. Stay vigilant for any leaves or berries that drop to the ground. Note—your pet might be attracted to those, too.

HOLLY
Holly (Ilex species) is small evergreen tree or shrub with stiff, prickly leaves and red berries. The berries contain toxic compounds which can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and in rare cases—drowsiness. Swallowing 20-30 berries is considered a toxic dose for adults, although there are reports of people who experienced symptoms after swallowing smaller amounts. Symptoms have been reported in children who swallowed as few as 5 berries. Young children may be particularly attracted to the bright red berries. The leaves are not poisonous, but could be a choking hazard.

POINSETTIA
Poinsettia (Euphorbia pulcherrima) is a showy shrub with green leaves and “flowers” that are red, white, or pink. The flowers are not true flowers; instead, they are leaves that changed color. Poinsettias have a reputation for being deadly, but in fact they are not poisonous at all. The plant does contain a sap that can cause some minor skin irritation in some people. This sap can be irritating to the mouth and stomach if swallowed. Also, the large, soft leaves could be a choking hazard for a young child.

BULBS
There are many species of spring-blooming, fragrant plants which grow from a bulb. Several, including amaryllis, paperwhites, daffodils, and hyacinth, have become popular holiday favorites. Dormant bulbs are brought indoors in autumn to encourage the plant to emerge into full bloom a few months early. These plants may be poisonous, especially the bulbs which look like onions or shallots. Avoid mistaken identity—store loose bulbs in a safe place, far from food, where children can’t reach. If eaten, symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea could result. Some bulb species also contain compounds which can cause burning and irritation of the mouth, throat, and skin.

EVERGREEN TREES
Pine, spruce, fir, and other species of evergreen tree used for Christmas trees or decorations are not poisonous. However, their stiff needles make them a choking hazard.

CHRISTMAS CACTUS
These potted plants are not poisonous. But like many of the other plants mentioned in this article, their spiky leaves are a choking hazard for children.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND
- A more complete list of toxic indoor or outdoor...
Some plants may be dangerous only under specific conditions. For example, steeping a plant in hot water to make an herbal “tea” could concentrate harmful compounds into a poisonous amount. (In fact, there are two recorded deaths which resulted from a homemade mistletoe tea.)

Sometimes only certain parts of a plant are poisonous. For example, it is unsafe to eat the green parts of the potato plant, or the seeds of the castor bean (aka tickseed) plant.

It could be harmful to swallow any plant if it has been sprayed with certain pesticides, fertilizers, or decorative products such as paint or glitter.

Know what is growing in your house and yard. Bring clippings to a nursery if you need help identifying plants. Teach children not to eat plants, berries, and mushrooms they find growing outdoors.

If you are concerned about someone who has had any contact with a plant, call the Blue Ridge Poison Center right away for help: 1-800-222-1222. Don’t wait for someone to look or feel sick.

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Poison Safety Tips & More! www.brpc.virginia.edu

News and Notes

FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, M.D., announced on Nov. 15, 2018 that his agency would seek to restrict the sales of most flavored e-cigarette products in an effort to make them less attractive to children and teens. From 2017 to 2018, according to data from the National Youth Tobacco Survey, the number of high-school-age children reporting use of e-cigarettes rose by more than 75 percent. Use among middle-schoolers also increased nearly 50 percent. The surge in e-cigarette use by teenagers is alarming because nicotine is highly addictive and can harm brain development, which continues into young adulthood. Worse, kids who start on e-cigarettes are actually more likely than non-user peers to migrate to smoking tobacco, as shown by data in a 2018 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. Read the entire press release here: https://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm625884.htm
Alternatively, search for it on www.fda.gov.

Poison Control Centers in October. Pictured here with Stephen Kaminski, JD, Executive Director, AAPCC.