



Healthy Hints for the Holidays

Drug & Poison Information Center



If you are in the Ohio counties of Adams, Ashland, Ashtabula, Brown, Butler, Carroll, Clermont, Clinton, Columbiana, Crawford, Hamilton, Highland, Holmes, Mahoning, Portage, Richland, Stark, Summit, Trumbull, Tuscarawas, Warren, Wayne, contact the Cincinnati Drug and Poison Information Center (DPIC) at (513) 558-5111 (24 hours) or (800) 872-5111. The TTY number is (800) 253-7955.

The holidays are usually a time for bringing family and friends together and sharing in the joy of the season. However, the season also brings into our homes the potential for hazards if we're not careful. The following information includes frequent holiday safety problems and how to make sure you and your family have a safe and happy holiday.

ALCOHOL: Ethyl alcohol is a common and potentially toxic ingredient in holiday beverages (eggnog, cocktail drinks, beer, etc.). It, or denatured alcohol, is also found in gifts such as perfumes and colognes. Do not leave unfinished drinks lying around after a holiday party where children might find them. Children, because of their small size, are much more likely to get alcohol poisoning than adults. Also, adults should check to be sure that drinking alcohol will not interact with any prescription or over-the-counter drugs they are taking. As always, do not drink and drive. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if an exposure occurs in a young child.

ANGEL HAIR: Spun glass can irritate the eyes, skin, gastrointestinal tract (stomach and intestines) mucosal surfaces (linings of the mouth and nose), etc. Wash or irrigate affected areas if exposure occurs. If symptoms occur, contact your local poison control center or a physician.

CANDLES: Wax and synthetic candles are inert (unchanging) and will not cause symptoms. Neither coloring nor the scents that gives candles their smell is present in a large enough amount to cause a problem.

CHRISTMAS CACTUS: The DPIC has found no evidence that either of the two varieties of this plant is toxic. One source stated that the plant had been eaten without harm.

CHRISTMAS TREES AND EVERGREENS: Spruce, pines and various firs make up the majority of evergreens used inside during the holidays. The main problems that occur are from the sharp needles, not from any toxic components of the plants. Yew evergreens are rarely used, but should be discouraged since some parts of the Yew (especially the seed in the berries) can be poisonous.

CHRISTMAS TREE GARLAND, TINSEL, ICICLES, ETC.: Most newer commercial products consist of polyvinyl chloride and an aluminum coloring. The main risk is getting it stuck in the throat or airway after eating/swallowing it. Some older forms consist of metallic foil streamers that may contain 40 percent metallic tin and 60 percent metallic lead. These do not dissolve well in the stomach or intestines and are thus poorly absorbed, making lead or tin poisoning unlikely.

CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHT BUBBLING FLUID: Bubbling fluids vary, but most consist of methylene chloride in less than one teaspoon in each bulb. When a bulb is broken with some liquid spilled and the remainder swallowed, it is unlikely that a child receives a poisonous quantity. Central nervous system depression and excitation (slower breathing or heart rate or increase in breathing or heart rate) are possible from larger quantities of methylene chloride, as is a change in the way blood carries oxygen to the body. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if exposure occurs.

CHRISTMAS TREE ORNAMENTS: Made of thin metal, plastic, wood, glass, etc., Christmas tree ornaments are of concern for their potential to cut or block the throat if swallowed. Single, small swallows of the dry paint or coloring on these objects should not pose a hazard.

CHRISTMAS TREE PRESERVATIVES: The contents of these vary. Some brands are nontoxic (primarily sugar) while others may contain fertilizers, magnesium sulfate (a laxative), etc. Contact your local poison control center if an exposure occurs. They can help determine if you have a problem in your particular situation.

CHRISTMAS TREE SCENTS: The contents vary, but some contain petroleum distillates or isopropyl alcohol which can cause serious problems if ingested. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if an exposure occurs.

CYCLAMEN: Very little is known about how poisonous this popular plant is to humans. There are some old reports that say it contains a very powerful poison and even reports that certain Indian tribes used it as a source of poison for their arrows. The safest thing to do is to assume that the cyclamen is a poisonous plant until there is proof that it is not. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if an exposure occurs.

DISC (BUTTON) BATTERIES: These can be found in common gift items such as toys, cameras, watches and calculators. Children or adults swallowing a disc battery should be medically evaluated, which usually involves referral to an emergency department for x-ray location of the object. Further care will be dictated by the initial findings and by follow-up. Problems usually only occur if the battery becomes lodged and/or ruptures. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if an exposure occurs.

DRY ICE: Dry ice is used in many ways throughout the holiday season and care must be taken to avoid swallowing or making skin contact with solid pieces of dry ice. Dry ice is made of carbon dioxide. Skin contact can cause tissue damage and oral (mouth) burns can occur from swallowing it. Flush the skin with lukewarm water if direct exposure occurs and give lukewarm water to drink if a solid piece is swallowed. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if a direct exposure occurs, especially if swallowed.

ESSENTIAL OILS AND FLAVORS: Some ingredients like salicylates in oil of wintergreen, menthol, camphor, eucalyptol, lavender and others can be poisonous. Other products may have a high alcohol content (see "Alcohol" information). Many of these products have the potential to cause severe problems if ingested directly from the container. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if an exposure occurs.

GLOW-IN-THE-DARK STICKS AND COSTUMES: Glowing light sticks and jewelry often contain small amounts of cyalume (an alcohol) that should not be enough to cause a problem. If the cyalume is swallowed, give sweetened liquids to drink.

HOLIDAY MEATS: Use safe handling, storage, thawing and preparation techniques to keep from getting sick. This means washing your hands and adequately cleaning surfaces that have been in contact with raw meat before touching other food. The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline (1-800-535-4555) has additional tips on cooking and storing meat. The Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition has more food safety tips.

JERUSALEM CHERRY: Although this plant allegedly contains solanine, a substance found in several plants with toxic potential, there are few case reports of poisoning. Reported signs and symptoms of solanine toxicity include dilated pupils, salivation (drooling), nausea (upset stomach), vomiting, headache, bloating, diarrhea, respiratory depression (i.e., breathing slows down), central nervous system depression, confusion, tachycardia (excessively rapid heart beat), coma and death. It is unclear how many cherries would have to be eaten to cause any of these symptoms. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if an exposure occurs.

HOLLY (ILEX): There are at least 400 different varieties of holly. They have berries that are colored black, brownish-black, red or rarely yellow. The berries of a few of the hundreds of varieties of this plant, commonly used in Christmas decorations, are reported to be poisonous. Nausea (upset stomach), vomiting, diarrhea and central nervous system depression (slow down of breathing and heart rate) may occur after eating holly berries. Although the exact nature of the toxic chemicals in holly is not yet known, it is claimed that deaths have occurred in children who have eaten as few as 12 berries. Some varieties of holly do not have sharp leaves. Children might eat these leaves which could also have potentially poisonous chemicals. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if an exposure occurs.

LAMP OIL AND LIQUID CANDLES: Lamp oil, used in oil lamps and liquid candles, is in the class of chemicals known as petroleum distillates. Products are often attractively colored and scented. When swallowed, these substances can easily be drawn into the lungs, causing coughing and a form of pneumonia called "chemical pneumonitis."

MISTLETOE: Certain varieties of mistletoe contain substances, which, in large quantities, can affect nerves, blood pressure and heart. Berries are most likely to have poisonous effects, although other parts of the plant also have toxins. However, in amounts (one or two berries) usually ingested by small children, there is no documented cause for alarm or need for treatment. Contact your local poison control center or a physician if an exposure occurs.

POINSETTIA: There is considerable difference in published reports about the potential toxicity of florist varieties of poinsettias. The DPIC's views, based on review of evidence from many sources, are that:

- a. Serious intoxications probably do not occur from eating parts of the domestic varieties of poinsettia (gastrointestinal and local irritation are occasionally reported);
- b. It is possible for children who play with the leaves of this plant and then rub their eyes to experience redness and local irritation; and
- c. Claims on either extreme (for example, that it can cause "fatal convulsions" or that it is "completely" harmless) are not supported by indisputable evidence.

"SNOW SPRAY" and "FLOCK": The particles of these products are usually composed of an inert plastic material. Eating it should not be poisonous. The propellant (gas used to make the spray) used for these products varies, but some contain methylene chloride. This should not pose a hazard once the product has dried.



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