



## Holiday Poisoning Hazards

The winter holiday season brings festive activity to our homes – and the potential for accidental poisoning to our families. Unusual plants and decorations are displayed indoors, visitors bring their medications in suitcases and purses, alcoholic beverages are served at holiday celebrations and brightly packaged products beckon underneath the tree. These changes in the home can set the stage for problems. Excited, curious youngsters may have access to poisons as adult attention is somewhat distracted by holiday preparations.

What can you do to prevent an accidental poisoning from interrupting the holiday season? First, learn to identify those holiday items which may be poisonous to children – and also those which are not a danger. Some things feared by many people as highly poisonous which DO NOT deserve that reputation include:

- ❖ Poinsettia – accidental ingestion of this plant has not caused ANY cases of serious poisoning in children despite thousands of exposures each Christmas. 
- ❖ Shellacked or Varnished Ornaments – the shellac or varnish, once dried, is very poorly digested and therefore not poisonous. Dough ornaments may contain lots of table salt which can cause poisoning in children who eat more than a small amount. 
- ❖ Tinsel and Icicles – often made of plastic or aluminum, they are not usually poisonous but can cause choking.
- ❖ Tree Ornaments – most modern ornaments are plastic, glass, or Styrofoam and are NOT poisonous. Many ornaments can cause choking if swallowed. Antique and heirloom ornaments could be covered with lead-containing paints so should not be used in homes with small children. 

Of course, there are products in the home during the holiday season which can cause acute poisoning if ingested by children. Some of the more common holiday poisons include:

Alcohols – children are especially at risk for poisoning from even small amounts of ethanol alcohol. Drinking it can cause a dangerous drop in blood sugar levels, leading to seizures and death. Colognes and after shaves have high alcohol content and should not be kept under the Christmas tree, within easy reach. Beverage alcohols – beer, wine, and liquor – should always be stored out of reach as well. After the holiday party, empty all beverage glasses before curious children can sample left-overs.



Call 800-222-1222 for fast, free and expert poison help.  
Virginia Poison Center

## Holiday Poisoning Hazards continued...



Mistletoe – although American mistletoe is not as deadly as the European type, ingestion of more than two or three of the berries can cause illness in children.

Holly – the bright red berries are very attractive to a small child and can cause severe vomiting and diarrhea if more than a few are ingested.



Batteries – yes, those battery-operated toys are a potential source of poisoning! The small disc batteries used in remote controls and many toys can be a serious problem if swallowed. This type of battery can cause choking, intestinal blockages or injury, and poisoning from leaking contents.



Medications – these are a problem all year, of course. Family and friends can bring this unexpected danger with them when they visit during the holidays. Luggage and purses left unattended are attractive to the curious child, who may be poisoned by the medications carried in them.

Prevent accidental poisoning during the holiday season. Use common sense in choosing decorations and plants. If you're not sure whether a decoration is safe, call the poison center before having it in the home. Store all alcohol-based products, and medications, in a secure, **LOCKED** cabinet. Always supervise small children playing with battery-powered toys or other devices.

If someone may have touched or swallowed a potential poison, stay calm and immediately call the Virginia Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222. The nurse specialist there will be able to quickly assess the situation and tell you exactly what to do. Poison control centers are open twenty-four hours daily. Their help is always fast, free and expert. If you call right away, the poison center's help can prevent an accidental poisoning from becoming a serious illness.

Don't let the holiday season be a time of poisoning—exercise caution, keep the poison center number posted and enjoy a happy and safe holiday season.

*Happy Holidays!*

### Virginia Poison Center

VCU Medical Center

Toll Free Emergency #: (800) 222-1222 or

In Richmond: (804) 828-9123

[www.vapoison.org](http://www.vapoison.org)

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