

# Toxic hazards for children in the household

Babies and toddlers are curious about the world around them and put everything in their mouths on their journey of discovery.

The risk of poisoning is therefore particularly high at this age and the dangers lurk in materials and substances which are part of everyday life in many households.

## Lamp oil

Lamp oil is still one of the most **dangerous types of product** found in the household, even though coloured and fragrant petroleum-based and paraffin-based lamp oil has been banned throughout the EU since the year 2000. Another law brought in at the end of 2010 dictates that lamp oil may only be sold in black bottles bearing a warning notice.

Swallowing even the smallest amounts of lamp oil can cause severe breathing difficulties and inflammation of the lungs with potentially fatal results.

- Therefore do not use oil lamps filled with **petroleum-based liquids** when there are babies and small children in the household. It is almost always the case that it is not drunk from the childproof containers but from easily accessible lamps.
- Always seek medical advice if swallowed.
- In case of shortness of breath or a coughing attack, call the emergency medical services immediately and have the original packaging or label ready to hand.

## Nicotine

Nicotine in its pure form is a highly toxic substance. Even small quantities can be dangerous for children.

A slight case of **nicotine poisoning** might manifest itself in restlessness, trembling, vomiting, sweating and pallor. In severe cases, additional symptoms might include impaired consciousness, breathing difficulties, seizures and serious circulatory disorders.

- Particular hazards include **cigarette stubs**, which contain more nicotine which can be released more quickly, **nicotine-infused liquid** (in bottles filled with water used as ashtrays) and **nicotine patches or nicotine gum** as used when attempting to stop smoking.
- The nicotine **liquids** in e-cigarettes are also dangerous for children.
- Keep tobacco products out of reach of children and always dispose of the remains immediately.
- Children who have imbibed or ingested nicotine should be kept under observation. If symptoms of poisoning are observed, seek medical advice.

## Alcohol

Children are more sensitive in their reaction to alcohol than adults, and even a **small amount of alcohol** can lead to unconsciousness.

Young children usually dislike the taste of **high-proof alcoholic drinks** because of their burning sensation. **Aftershave, perfume, mouthwash and medicines** may also be high in alcohol content and toxic if a certain amount is swallowed.

Alcohol is also found in many **cleaning products**, such as window cleaners, which can cause severe poisoning symptoms when ingested.

**Products containing alcohol** which are not suitable for consumption contain various **additives** which can also cause poisoning.

- Products containing alcohol should therefore always be shut or locked away.
- Always dispose of any leftover drinks, especially after parties.
- If a child has consumed a relatively large amount of alcohol or develops typical symptoms, you should seek medical advice.

## Medicines

Many pharmaceuticals, including over-the-counter medicines, pose a risk in principle if used incorrectly.

- Never use adult medication for your children without consulting the doctor. Improper use and incorrect dosage are fraught with risk because the same product will have different effects in adults and children.
- Always keep medicines out of reach of infants. This also applies to remedies which are used regularly or are supposedly harmless, such as nasal drops, homoeopathic remedies or products containing essential oils (“medicinal plant oil”).
- Do not take medicine in the presence of infants as they might copy the action.
- Keep medicines in their original packaging in order to avoid mix-ups.

## Cosmetics

Many toiletries like **soap, shampoo or bath salts** contain foaming agents which irritate the mucous membranes. Any vomiting caused by the surface action can admit foam into the airways, leading to irritation of the throat, inflammation of the lungs, shortness of breath and suffocation.

Cosmetic products for children do not have an unpleasant smell or taste. This means that relatively large amounts can soon be swallowed if children try to drink them.

- Packaging which resembles beverage cans or other food containers should be avoided because of the risk of confusion.
- Inhalation of talcum powder for babies is just as dangerous for the lungs.

## Pesticides and household chemicals

Whether **mousetrap bait and rat bait** in the household or **pesticides** in the garden – it is important to weigh up the benefits and risks. The products are dangerous for curious children.

Young children like to try **household chemicals**. Products which cause chemical burns to the skin and mucous membranes, such as **drain cleaner and oven cleaner**, are particularly hazardous.

**Batteries**, e.g. button cells, may get stuck in the oesophagus or cause chemical burns if swallowed.

Many household products contain solvents, e.g. **paint, varnish, thinner, brush cleaner, stain remover and nail polish remover**. If swallowed, they may cause nausea, vomiting, headaches and coughing, with a risk of life-threatening poisoning if ingested in large quantities.

- Always seek medical advice if your child has swallowed any of the above.
- Make sure that childproof caps are securely closed and that the products are safely stored.
- Always leave the products in their original containers.
- If caustic or irritating substances have come into **contact with the skin or eyes**, rinse with water for at least 10 minutes; if **swallowed**, drink a glass of non-carbonated water or tea.
- Even if there are no symptoms (initially), contact the poisons information centre (GIZ) to ask for recommendations for action.

## What is the general course of action to take in case of poisoning?

- Notify the poisons information centre (**Giftinformationszentrale - GIZ**) and follow the instructions.
- In case of severe symptoms, such as vomiting or apathy, call the emergency services (112) immediately.
- Assist in case of vomiting, but **do not induce vomiting**.
- In case of loss of consciousness, keep the airways clear and place the child in the **recovery position**.
- In case of respiratory or cardiac arrest, perform resuscitation procedures.

**A list of the poisons information centres is available here for download and printing:**

[https://das-sichere-haus.de/fileadmin/pdf/Giftinformationszentren\\_\\_Stand\\_Februar\\_2022.pdf](https://das-sichere-haus.de/fileadmin/pdf/Giftinformationszentren__Stand_Februar_2022.pdf)

Information last revised: summer 2023

<https://das-sichere-haus.de/wohnung-kindersicher-machen>