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Public Health reminder: Be alert to holiday poisoning and choking hazards

ALBANY, Ga. – The holiday season’s trappings and traditions bring an unwelcome visitor – the increased likelihood of accidental poisoning or choking.

“When people get caught up in the festivities and activities this time of year, they may not realize that changes in the home environment can set the stage for problems,” said Southwest Health District Health Director Dr. Jacqueline Grant. “You need to be aware of holiday hazards and take steps to reduce the risk that a child or pet swallows something dangerous. Nobody wants to have an accidental poisoning spoil the holiday.”

Changes in the daily schedule, holiday visitors and the cold and flu season are factors that can increase the amount and kind of medications within a household, she said. “Excited, curious youngsters may mistake a visitor’s pills for candy, and they may have an opportunity to get to the pills because adults are distracted by holiday preparations,” said Dr. Grant. “Remember to keep all medications locked up and out of reach.”

Alcohol poisoning is another hazard. “Children are especially at risk for poisoning from even small amounts of ethanol alcohol because their blood sugar may drop to low levels,” she said. Colognes and aftershaves often have high alcohol content, so gifts of such items should not be placed under the tree or anywhere else where small fingers can easily reach them.

Also, during holiday gatherings when alcoholic beverages are served, adults should make sure beer, wine and liquor are out of reach of children. “Police the area during and after the party for discarded beverages so children won’t be tempted to sample the drink,” added Grant.

Other dangers include decorations of mistletoe and holly, she said. “Only two or three mistletoe berries can poison small children. The bright red holly berries are attractive to small children, but both holly berries and leaves can cause severe illness if eaten,” Grant said. “Poinsettias can irritate the mouth and cause stomach cramps if swallowed.”

Batteries are another danger. “Swallowed batteries can cause choking, intestinal blockages or injuries or poisoning from leaking contents. The small disc batteries can stick in the esophagus, obstructing it or causing severe burns,” she warned.

Adults should also be alert to the risks Christmas trees pose to children and pets.

“They are often fascinated by the decorations, and can end up chewing on tinsel, lights and ornaments, or putting them in their mouths,” Grant said. “While the tree decorations may not be

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poisonous, they are certainly dangerous in that they can lead to choking, electric shock and other injuries among unsupervised children and pets. Your Christmas tree should be off-limits to your cats and dogs.”

If a potential poisoning does occur, adults should remain calm and immediately call for help, she said. The Georgia Poison Center offers free poison treatment 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week, all year round.

“Their emergency poison hot-line number is 1-800-222-1222,” Dr. Grant said. “That is a good number to keep on hand throughout the holidays and throughout the rest of the year as well.”

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