

Poison Proofing

Babies explore the world by putting things in their mouth. That's one reason more than 1 million children under age 6 are victims of accidental poisoning each year. You can help keep your baby safe by identifying and locking up toxic materials and knowing what to do if he touches, inhales, or swallows something poisonous.

How can I tell which substances are poisonous?

It's not always obvious what's hazardous and what's not, and poisonous substances may not be in plain sight. Conduct a room-by-room inventory of non-food products, listing anything that's out in the open as well as inside drawers, cupboards, and closets. Then make sure all poisons are clearly labeled and locked out of a child's reach. If you don't know whether a product is poisonous, check the label or call the American Association of Poison Control Centers' hot line at (800) 222-1222.

Here are some of the hazardous substances most commonly ingested by children under age 6:

- Cosmetics and personal care products, such as mouthwash, nail products, hair remover, and baby oil (never leave baby oil or similar products within your baby's reach – in a few cases, infants have died from getting baby oil in their lungs).
- Prescription drugs such as heart and blood pressure medications, antidepressants, sleeping pills, diabetes medications, pain medications, and time-release medications
- Cleaning products, including drain cleaner, oven cleaner, toilet bowl cleaner, bleach, dishwasher detergent, furniture polish, and rust remover.
- Pain relievers such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, which are poisonous when taken in large doses (never give a child aspirin, as it can lead to Reye's syndrome, a rare brain and liver disease that can be fatal).
- Cough and cold medications
- Vitamin supplements, especially iron pills
- Household plants, especially philodendron and holly berries
- Paint thinner, paint remover, kerosene, lighter fluids, antifreeze, and windshield washer fluid.
- Pesticides.
- Alcohol

How can I make sure that my baby doesn't get hold of any harmful substances?

If possible, start poison-proofing your house before your baby is born. You'd be surprised how fast your baby will learn to get into cupboards and open child-resistant caps.

Lock up all medicines and harmful substances. Secure all cupboards that contain poisons, even those that seem out of reach, with safety latches or locks. Poison experts know of many young children who've dragged a chair over to a kitchen counter, climbed onto the counter or even the refrigerator, and opened a cupboard near the ceiling. Your child may be able to do something like this before you know it.

Get rid of old or expired medications. Don't flush old medications down the toilet or pour them down the drain, as they can contaminate the water supply. If you live in the United States, ask your local waste disposal agency whether there's a program in place for safely disposing of them. You can also ask whether your pharmacy will take back expired medication. If these options aren't available, you'll have to throw the drugs away in the trash — but first be sure to secure them so your baby can't get to them.

How can I safely dispose of expired medication with kids in the house?

Mary Euler, pharmacist, explains that the best thing to do is check with your local waste management company (the people who pick up your curbside garbage) or your city/county waste disposal program. They can let you know whether there's a local program in place for safely getting rid of your expired medications.

You can also try checking with your local pharmacy to see whether it can take your expired drugs from you. Not all pharmacies offer this service, though. In fact, some states don't allow pharmacies to take back drugs that have been in a consumer's possession.

If none of those options pan out, you should throw out your expired medications in the trash. Contrary to widely given advice, you shouldn't flush them down the toilet or drain. Flushing medications might seem like best way to keep them out

of your child's reach, but it creates a potential public health hazard by allowing drugs to get into the water supply.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been doing a lot of research on this, and we now know that certain levels of some types of drugs can be detected in water treatment plants. From there, they could find their way into groundwater, rivers, and streams.

You can safely dispose of your expired drugs in the trash — and be confident that your kids won't get into them — if you follow these steps:

- Leave the medications in their original container with the childproof lid. (If it's a prescription medicine, remove or black out the label to protect your personal information.)
- If the container is glass, put it inside a sturdy cardboard box and seal it. The box protects the bottle so it's less likely to break and makes it harder for little hands to get to.
- If you're tossing liquid medication, you can minimize the chance that a child will drink it by putting something terrible-tasting in it, like cayenne pepper.
- Keep the trash can in a place your child doesn't have access to. And if your trash is collected from the curb, don't put it there until the day of collection — the less time it's out there, the less chance any person or animal will get into it.

Don't rely on child-resistant containers. Child-resistant doesn't mean childproof. Hopefully, the resistant cap will delay a child's ability to open the container long enough for an adult to discover what's going on and to intervene in time. Remember: No bottle top is ever so secure that a child can't find some way to get it off. "It's not unusual for a 2-year-old, left alone for 30 minutes, to break down the best devices of the manufacturer," warns pediatrician Mark Widome.

Keep medicines, pesticides, and even detergents in their original containers. Never put poisonous or toxic products in unlabeled containers or containers that were once used for food. Poison centers have heard too many horror stories about how a toxic liquid in an unmarked container has been mistaken for apple juice.

Move purses, luggage, and grocery bags away from prying hands. A tube of brightly hued lipstick or a bottle of coated pills can look like candy to a baby. Store your purse on a high shelf, and unpack anything potentially dangerous from your grocery bag before you turn to another task.

Never refer to any kind of medicine as candy. Even if you're trying to get a reluctant child to take cough syrup, don't treat it as something good to eat. Children learn by imitation, so take your own medicine when your baby isn't watching. Just to be safe, teach him never to eat anything without asking an adult first.

Read labels before buying household products, and try to use the least toxic ones. Among the household products generally considered less hazardous are non-chlorine bleaches, vinegar, borax, and beeswax. Unclog drains with compressed air instead of corrosive liquids.

Always keep a watchful eye on your baby. Even the most thorough childproofing is no substitute for supervision. Be extra vigilant when visiting the house of a friend or relative, particularly if it hasn't been childproofed.

What should I do if I think my child has swallowed something harmful?

The American Academy of Pediatrics no longer recommends that you keep syrup of ipecac on hand in case of poisoning, because it hasn't been shown to be effective in preventing poisoning and can potentially be misused. Instead, post the toll-free number for the American Association of Poison Control Centers' national emergency hot line by your phone and be ready to call for help in case of a poisoning (800) 222-1222. Post the number now, *before* an emergency occurs.

If your baby's unconscious, not breathing, or having a seizure, call 911 immediately. Otherwise, at the first sign that your child may have been poisoned, call the national emergency hot line posted next to your phone: (800) 222-1222. You'll automatically be put in touch with a local poison control center. Local lines are staffed 24 hours a day by registered pharmacists, nurses, and doctors with special training in responding to poisoning crisis calls and answering routine questions about household poisons.