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Child poisonings from medications still causing problems

Research from the NSW Poisons Information Centre and the University of Sydney has shown children are still being poisoned by medications, despite changes to child resistant packaging requirements introduced last decade.

The study found that in New South Wales, between 2007 and 2013, there were 67,816 calls to the NSW Poisons Information Centre (PIC), 7,739 emergency department presentations and 2,082 hospital admissions for accidental child poisonings from medicines.

“Many parents do not realise child resistant packaging does not mean medication is child proof,” Dr Rose Cairns, senior poisons specialist in the NSW Poisons Information Centre said.

“Every day we take calls about children who have accessed medication in child resistant packaging. All medications must be stored safely out of reach of children when not in immediate use, preferably in a locked cupboard 1.5 metres above ground.”

Paracetamol and ibuprofen were the most common medications children were accidentally exposed to, with children aged one to two years being the most common age group involved, largely due to the inquisitive developmental stage of the age group.

Most accidental exposures occur in the home, where storage has not been ideal including medications left on the bench or bedside after use during the night, medications in handbags and nappybags, medications taken out of their original packaging and medications that are stored in the fridge.

“Based on our study, it is estimated that approximately one in every 50 children under five years are accidentally exposed to medication every year.”

“It is important that parents and carers, especially grandparents, realise that medications can be poisonous and consider all the possible ways kids can access medications,” Dr Cairns said.

In addition, the study found that while non-urgent presentations to hospital increased, the number of calls to the NSW Poisons Information Centre decreased, suggesting more targeted strategies may be needed to further educate the community around the use of the 13 11 26 Poisons Centre Service.

“The community need to know that the Poisons Information Centre is a 24/7 emergency telephone service and it is often helpful to contact us before going to hospital,” Dr Cairns said.

We can provide advice on first aid and management of all exposures, chemicals and medications as well as bites and stings, and after hours medicine information.”

If you suspect your child has been accidentally exposed to medication, or for any other poisons advice, please call 13 11 26.