

Holiday Hazard Myths

Myths about holiday hazards run rampant during the holiday season. Here are a few we'd like to clear up:

Myth #1- "Poinsettias are poisonous". This popular holiday plant has had a bad reputation for years but is not considered to be toxic. The rumor about the dangers of eating poinsettia leaves dates back to 1919 when a two year-old child reportedly died following the ingestion of the plant. The death was unconfirmed and determined to be hearsay, but has been recounted repeatedly in books and in the press. The sap in the plant is mildly irritating to the skin and eyes, and can cause nausea and vomiting when large amounts of leaves are ingested but is not expected to cause severe toxicity. In an analysis of 22,793 cases reported by U.S. poison centers from 1985 to 1992, 92.4% did not develop any toxicity. Minor effects were observed in 3.4% of patients and there were no fatalities. Children accounted for 93.3% of the exposures. (*Am J Emerg Med* 1996;14:671-4). Numerous animal studies have failed to determine a dose that would produce severe toxicity or death. One study extrapolated the results to conclude that a child would have to eat over 500 poinsettia leaves to reach a potentially toxic dose (*Clin Tox* 1978; 13:27-45).

Myth #2- "Mistletoe berries are deadly when ingested". The American mistletoe plant has a long history of rumors and myths based on the toxicity of the European mistletoe (*Viscum album*). Although both species of parasitic plants contain similar toxins that inhibit protein synthesis, the toxicity associated with the European mistletoe is related to the medicinal use of plant extracts in excessive doses, and not with unintentional pediatric ingestions of the berries or leaves. Most pediatric ingestions result in no symptoms, but mild gastrointestinal symptoms (nausea, vomiting diarrhea) may occur. A review of data from 1,754 cases reported to the American Association of Poison Control Centers over an 8 year period failed to reveal any patients with severe symptoms or fatalities (*Am J Emerg Med* 1997;15:516-20).

Myth #3- "Bubble lights no longer contain a toxic liquid". Bubble lights were very popular from the 1940's to 1970's and are making a comeback as people become nostalgic for Christmas family traditions. Bubble lights are a string of lights for the Christmas tree that contain a fluid-filled base. When turned on, heat causes the liquid to boil giving the appearance of bubbling. The liquid might be water or a lightweight oil but is typically methylene chloride, the same solvent found in paint strippers. Although the amount in one bubble light is unlikely to produce anything more than oral irritation, larger ingestions can result in lethargy, coma and accompanying respiratory depression. In addition, methylene chloride is converted to carbon monoxide when ingested and can result in elevated carboxyhemoglobin concentrations and symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning.

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Did you know?

Holly berries have long been thought to be highly poisonous.

Holly (*Ilex sp.*) contains saponins that cause gastrointestinal effects when ingested. Although a few berries may cause nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, there is no known toxic amount that would cause death. Drowsiness, dehydration and electrolyte abnormalities may occur with the ingestion of a large number of berries.

You'll find more information on holiday hazards including downloadable pages for the public on the Maryland Poison Center website: www.mdpoison.com/



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