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For immediate release

After bleach ingestion incident, South Texas Poison Center shares facts on household chemicals

SAN ANTONIO (Feb. 22, 2012) — After a recent incident in which children at a Gonzales daycare facility were mistakenly given diluted bleach to drink, the South Texas Poison Center wants to share the facts about the hazards of this and other household chemicals.

At least one child last Wednesday reportedly drank a bleach solution that consisted of a quarter cup of bleach per gallon of water. “It’s nowhere near the dose that would cause a serious adverse health effect,” said Miguel Fernández, M.D., a medical toxicologist and the director of the South Texas Poison Center. “It’s the dose that makes the poison.”

Reports of children swallowing bleach are among the most common calls to the poison center, Dr. Fernández said. But it’s rare that someone swallows enough household bleach to need to go to the hospital or emergency room, and that’s especially true with a diluted bleach solution.

“We nearly always recommend that those children stay under observation at home unless there is some other factor involved,” said Dr. Fernández, who is also an emergency room physician and professor of surgery with UT Medicine San Antonio, the clinical practice of the School of Medicine at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

Unless someone has ingested very large amounts of household bleach, which rarely occurs accidentally, the most likely adverse effects would be stomach upset and throat irritation, Dr. Fernández said.

He made the distinction between household and industrial bleach; ingesting the latter can be far more serious. Smaller amounts of industrial bleach can cause nausea, vomiting, inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract and oral cavity, corrosion of tissues and gastrointestinal bleeding.

Still, Dr. Fernández says, parents should not take chances. If they suspect a child has consumed household bleach, their first call should be to the South Texas Poison Center at 800-222-1222. The center is available to the public 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and service is free, confidential and bilingual in English and Spanish.

Dr. Fernández cautions parents and childcare providers to store household chemicals securely, preferably in a high, locked cabinet or other place that is inaccessible to children. He made special mention of chemicals associated with cars, including antifreeze and windshield wiper fluid, which are far more hazardous than household bleach.

Finally, he recommends against mixing chemicals and storing them in anything other than their original containers: “Kids will drink out of something because they think the container tells them what’s inside.”

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